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DEADWOOD DICK'S THREE



"WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS, IN BISMARCK?" DEMANDED THE SHERIFF. "WHAT OUR BUSINESS IS, IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, SIR!" WAS DEADWOOD DICK'S CURT RETORT.

OR,

The "Bellerin Bull" of Bismarck.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSE
BUD ROB" NOVELS, "BONANZA BILL,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE SHADOW OF A CONSPIRACY.

BISMARCK, Dakota.

The king city of the king of Northwestern Territories.

The date in November, one snow-bound day, when a blizzard of unusual force was blowing, and keeping nearly every one indoors.

In the gilded saloon of Peter Pendergrass, better known as "Peachblow Pete," on account of the ruddy color of his nasal appendage, men

were seated at one of the tables, engaged in conversation.

One was stout, smooth-faced, some thirty years of age, with a dark cast of countenance, small black eyes, and closely-cut hair, which, singularly enough, was as white as the snow that swirled against the windows of the saloon.

He was well dressed, wore good jewelry and had the appearance of being a man of means.

The second person was younger by some four years, and rather delicate looking. Indeed, his cheeks were hollowed, and his sunken eyes made evident that he was going into consumption, if, indeed, he was not already near his end.

Aside from his sickly look, he was rather an attractive-looking fellow, with brown hair, and a slight curling mustache.

There was another man at the table—an extremely tall individual, with long legs and a correspondingly lengthy neck, while his body looked thin enough for the wind to blow through it.

His face was also skinny and cadaverous, with high cheek-bones, cold gray eyes, and a mouth that, though large, betrayed no sense of good-humor.

His attire was of the shabby genteel order, and included a plug hat which had seen long and effective service.

The first person mentioned, was Duncan McDonald, a man of leisure, who lived by his wits, and was said to be quite wealthy, although in what his wealth consisted was not apparent, as he owned no real estate. He dabbled in politics, however, owned a fast horse, and aimed to be something of a lady's man. He had some little reputation of being a liberal man, but those who knew him best averred that his liberality was extended only to the rougher class—men whom he could depend upon to do his work, when he had any to do.

The second party was Fred Fairfax, a poor young man, who had to support himself and his recently wedded wife, Fanny, on the meager income of a grocer's clerk.

The third individual, an insurance agent, was known as Professor Lucius Pillbury, but better known in Bismarck as Old Pillbox.

Ostensibly he was the Western agent of an Eastern life and fire insurance company, with his office in Bismarck, while in reality he stood ready to engage in most any pursuit that did not require manual labor, and brought in money. He was not seriously troubled with conscientious scruples, and charges of swindling were made against him.

Young Fairfax evidently had just entered the saloon, and seated himself at the table, for he was saying interrogatively:

"You sent for me, Mr. McDonald?"

"I did," McDonald replied. "I heard to-day that your health was failing rapidly, and that you were greatly dispirited, and so as I have always taken a warm interest in you, I wanted to have a talk with you."

Fairfax looked somewhat surprised, for he had never known McDonald, intimately.

"Oh! that's all right." Have you any hope, Fairfax, that you will recover from this malady which is sapping away your life?"

Fairfax shook his head, sadly.

"None whatever," was the reply. "The disease has got so firm a hold upon me that there is no room to hope. Even if I could obtain proper medical care I have no money to pay for it!"

"I supposed as much, and that is why I asked you to come here. You are an industrious young fellow, and I would not want to see you die for want of proper attendance. So, if you will accept it, I will make you such a loan as will enable you to send for better medical aid than you can get here!"

The consumptive's eyes filled with moisture.

"You are very kind, sir, very kind, and I thank you, sincerely, but I could not think of accepting your offer. No consumptive at my advanced stage, was ever known to recover, and a large expenditure in my case, would be useless. I am fully aware that I must die, and am trying to be resigned to my fate."

"But, think of your wife!" urged McDonald. "In event of your death, she would be left alone and helpless, unless perchance she has rich relatives to whom she could apply for succor."

"Alas! she has none!" Fairfax said, still more sadly. "I married her an orphan, and my death would indeed leave her in embarrassing circumstances. But, of course, I am powerless to help that. When I am gone, she will have to trust to God to help her out of difficulty, and I trust he will do so."

"It is a very sad case!" McDonald said, "but not altogether a hopeless one."

"How do you mean?" and a ray of hope shone from the young man's eyes.

"Why, there is a way for providing for your wife's future support and comfort."

"I don't understand you yet!"

"Simple enough, my friend. Get your life insured."

Fred Fairfax smiled a sickly smile.

"That wouldn't work," he declared. "Companies don't take risks on consumptives; and besides, if they did, I couldn't raise the money to pay the first premium. No, no, Mr. McDonald, you mean all right, but my case is hopeless."

"Nonsense! Nothing of the sort!" the man of leisure said, rather impatiently. "Because you don't happen to know the ropes, it does not signify that others don't. Now, say, for instance, your wife received ten thousand dollars upon your death. That would be a nice little nest-egg, eh?"

"I'll admit that, but I don't see any possibility that such a thing can be."

"It will be clear enough when I make an explanation. Of course, in the general run of things, you could not get insured. But I have always liked you for your quiet ways, and can help matters along. You see, Professor Pillbury, here, represents the Great American Company, of New York, and being a personal friend of mine, will take a risk upon your life at the regular premium, and give you a policy on which, after your demise, ten thousand dollars will be paid your wife, thus placing her above want. The professor, however, don't want to get himself into any trouble, and therefore, would require that the policy be left in the charge of some reliable person until after your demise for safety's sake, for you know women are not as judicious in keeping a secret as men; also, he would require that the beneficiary be kept in ignorance of the insurance until the opening of your will. These provisions, you will see, would be necessary to guard against any chance of trouble."

"But I have no will."

"Humph! easy enough to make one, as, of course, you would make your wife the legatee."

"But, sir, I could not even pay the first premium."

"That matters not. If you wish to benefit your wife, I'll attend to the premiums. I am rich, and can well afford to do so."

Fairfax was silent for a couple of minutes, during which his gaze was bent thoughtfully on the table.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen," he said, finally, "but I don't quite understand this matter. It is apparent to me that you have held a previous discussion, and—and, pardon me, but somehow it looks to me like a preconcerted plan!"

Duncan McDonald frowned.

"Preconcerted plan!" he echoed. "Why, Fairfax, what do you mean? Really, I feel insulted!"

"I trust you will pardon my abruptness!" Fred returned answer, half apologetically, "but it seems so strange and unnatural that you should take so much interest in me and my wife, unless there was some prime motive back of it!"

McDonald laughed rather hoarsely, and Professor Pillbury did likewise, but the laugh of either lacked the true ring of heartiness.

"Well! well! what a foolish idea!" McDonald exclaimed. "Why, my dear boy, I assure you my motives are of the friendliest character. Such a scheme as you have hinted at has never entered my mind, or the professor's. Were we rogues and villains, even, an insurance on your life, would be naught to us, as we could not touch it. So you see your suspicion of a sinister or selfish motive on our parts, is unjust, to say the least!"

"Perhaps you are right. Indeed I am satisfied you are, and I apologize. I am not quite sure but what it would be advisable for me to adopt your suggestion for the proper protection of my wife, Mr. McDonald, and I will certainly give the matter due consideration."

And so saying Fred buttoned up his coat, preparatory to departure.

"You had better decide at once!" McDonald declared, "if at all, for, as soon as the storm abates, I shall leave town for an indefinite period, and could not attend to the case. Now, let me suggest that we adjourn to the professor's office and settle the thing at once. Mr. Pillbury is a practical lawyer, and can draw you up a will according as you may direct, and you can sign it. Then, the insurance policy can be made out, and you can go back to your work in the comforting reflection that, when you are taken away, your noble little wife will not be left destitute and at the mercy of strangers."

"I speak of this, Fairfax, my boy, for your own and your wife's good, and not from any mercenary motives. I believe it is every man's duty to be prepared, for no one can tell what a day will bring forth, or when the great Master will call us hence!"

The argument was sensible, and had its due effect upon the listener. He put forth his hand, and said:

"Mr. McDonald, you are right, and I realize that though I was not intimately acquainted with you before, you are my friend. If you are ready, we will attend to the matter at once."

"Very well. Then we will adjourn to Mr. Pillbury's office," McDonald decided.

Accordingly they left the "Punch Bowl," and made their way through the driving storm to the professor's office, which was an unplastered room over a grocery store, and cold and poorly furnished with a rudely constructed desk, a few chairs, and a stove with no fire in it.

Pillbury took his place at the desk, and after putting a few questions to Fred, began writing rapidly.

He was thus engaged when the door opened, and a fourth man entered the office, advanced to the desk, and laid a card upon it.

The card read:

CLAY COLEMAN,

Chicago.

Pillbury looked at the card, gave his visitor a swift, inquiring glance, nodded, and then turned his attention to his writing, while Mr. Coleman selected a chair and became seated.

He was a neatly dressed person, of good figure, and looked to be between thirty-eight and forty years of age, though, but for his luxuriant beard, he would no doubt have looked considerably younger.

His only display of jewelry was a magnificent diamond scarf-pin, from which emanated all the brilliant rays of the rainbow.

Professor Pillbury continued to write for several minutes; then he laid aside the pen.

"Well, Mr. Coleman," he observed, "this is a tough day for the beginning of winter, is it not?"

"I should remark!" the Chicagoan declared. "It is decidedly unpleasant. You are Mr. Pillbury, are you not—at least, I was led to this place, by direction!"

"I am Pillbury!" the insurance agent said, dramatically. "What can I do for you to-day, sir, in my line?"

"Oh, nothing particularly in your line. I simply want to have a chat with you on a matter of speculation, having been told that you would be able to give me a few points. Go on with your business with these gentlemen, as I am in no hurry."

Pillbury and McDonald exchanged glances, the meaning of which was as much as to say, "We'd much rather you'd go!"

However, neither said so in so many words, and Mr. Coleman seemed in no wise inclined to take an unuttered hint to leave.

Seeing this, Pillbury turned to Fred Fairfax.

"Client," he said, "your will, bequeathing everything to your wife, is ready. Will you look it over, and see if it is satisfactory?"

"Oh, you can read the will aloud, and I will examine it afterward," Fred replied. "I can get a better sense of it by hearing it read."

"But it would hardly be advisable to read it in the presence of strangers," suggested McDonald, anxiously.

"On the contrary, I want it so," replied Fred. "I shall want two witnesses to the will anyhow, to make it binding, and this gentleman"—indicating Coleman—"will have no objection, I presume, to witnessing my signature."

"None in the least!" Coleman promptly declared. "I shall probably remain permanently in Bismarck, and will be pleased to serve you."

McDonald and Pillbury were secretly enraged at this turn of affairs, but they made a brave effort to appear unconcerned.

"Oh, well, just as you please," the former said. "Of course it is immaterial to us. Professor, read the will."

Pillbury nodded assent, and proceeded to do so.

The will was in ordinary terms, bequeathing all of Frederic Fairfax's property, both real and personal, to his wife Frances, one item of the personal property consisting of a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy. The article also appointed Duncan McDonald executor of the will, so far as the insurance policy was concerned.

Fred Fairfax examined the document, and

pronounced it satisfactory, and then, in the presence of the other three men, attached his signature to it.

McDonald and Coleman signed themselves as witnesses, and the will was put away in the professor's desk, and that part of the matter was completed.

Pillbury then filled out an insurance application, which Fairfax signed, after which Pillbury received a sum of premium-money from McDonald, and Fred was informed that the policy would be ready in a few days.

Unfortunately the young man knew little or nothing of the rules and regulations of life insurance, and trusted wholly to McDonald's alleged friendship.

"Now you're all fixed," McDonald said, when the business was transacted. "You have done a wise thing in providing for your wife, for, in the event of your death, she will receive a nice little competency. Of course we hope you may live for years yet, and I trust you will hold your counsel as to to-day's arrangements, until, at least, your last moments."

"I shall do so. I feel greatly relieved at the prospect that Fannie will be left in comfortable circumstances, and I am much obliged to you all. I must return to work now, so I'll bid you good-day."

And shaking hands all around, he took his departure.

Pillbury then turned to Coleman.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"That can best be told when we are alone," was the quiet reply.

"Oh, if I'm in the way, I will retire!" McDonald said, with sarcasm. "Shall I see you to-night, professor?"

"Yes; I will meet you at the appointed place at eight o'clock."

"All right. Be punctual."

"I will. Good-day."

"Good-day!"

Duncan McDonald buttoned up his great-coat and left the room, casting a glance back over his shoulder at his confederate.

CHAPTER II.

THE OPIUM JOINT—THE THREE.

As many of the readers are probably aware, Bismarck, in its earlier days, was an exceedingly hard town; next to Cheyenne and Deadwood, one of the roughest and toughest.

But as the tide of settlement increased its population, and lifted it to the most important place in Dakota, its citizens with a firm hand weeded out the "resorts" until, at the present time, the town bears a respectable reputation.

The worst section is known as "The Borders," where nearly every vice had its house of representation, from the gilded gaming-palace to the lowest gin-mill, or opium-joint.

It was worth a stranger's life to venture across the Border after dark, and many were the startling stories of the gross indignities perpetrated by the rough denizens of the settlement.

Among the worst resorts of this locality, was Wah Lee's opium-joint. It was, with one or two exceptions, the largest shanty in the district, one story in height, and barn-like in appearance.

A small room in the front was occupied as a Chinese grocery, and presided over by an almond-eyed Chinaman.

Passing through a door at the rear of this grocery, you entered a room some fifty feet long by twenty in width. At the further end was a bar. Scattered about were tables for gambling purposes, and lounges where one who wanted a "whiff" could recline and smoke opium with comfort.

Opening off the main apartment, on either side, were numerous doors, which communicated with smaller rooms or box stalls, for the convenience of persons who did not wish to smoke in public.

This resort was nightly a scene of revelry and excitement, the principal features of which were gambling and drinking.

Money in large sums nightly changed hands, free fights were of frequent occurrence, and it was said that many persons who had ventured into the joint, out of curiosity, had never been known to come out. Certain it was, at least, that a number of the frequenters of the place, had died "with their boots on."

It was also rumored that beneath the big shanty, were dungeons, where dangerous characters could be secreted, if occasion required.

Wah Lee, the proprietor, was a raw-boned, sallow-skinned chap, who, unlike most of his race, was a very giant in size—a modern Samson in strength, and even the worst ruffians

who frequented his resort regarded him with fear.

He possessed more than the ordinary intelligence of his race, and was said to be rich. The joint, in itself, was a gold-mine, and though occasionally raided by the sheriff, there was no change in the character of the place.

Early evening about two weeks succeeding the events chronicled in our first chapter, saw the joint well filled with its motley throng, most of whom were engaged in games of chance, but the bar also had its patrons, while here and there a snuff-skinned Mongolian lay upon a lounge, seeking solace from the inevitable pipe, the peculiar odor from which filled the room.

The big proprietor, Wah Lee, paced slowly up and down the room, as was his usual custom, ready to take a hand in any disturbance that might occur.

At one of the tables sat three men, two of whom were professional gamblers and patrons of the joint, while the third, a stylishly-dressed, good-looking young fellow of twenty-one, was a stranger, and evidently from the East.

The gamblers' names were Black Bud and Van Scooter; the Easterner's, Luke Lenton, of Boston.

The Bostonian evidently had been losing, for he had only a small pile of chips in front of him, while the two gamblers' stacks were unusually large.

There was a bet of one hundred dollars, and it was young Lenton's turn. He looked over his cards, and then counted his chips, slowly.

"It costs me ten to play, gents?" he queried.

"You bet!" declared Black Bud, triumph in his tones. "If you can't play, the pot's mine, for Scooter has put down his cards."

"I can play!" Lenton replied. "If it's you and I, we'll fight it out. Here is a hundred dollars. I see you the ten, and go you ninety better—yes, I have ten in chips—there you are; one hundred better!"

Black Bud scowled.

"Humph! you think to bluff me, eh?" he sneered. "You'll miss it. No greenhorn ever bluffs me. Here! I'll see your hundred, and raise it five!"

And suiting action to the word, the gambler drew a huge roll of bills from his pocket, and counted out six hundred dollars upon the pot.

"There!" he said, in triumph.

Luke Lenton looked at the pile of wealth thoughtfully, as if in doubt what to do.

Already he had lost three times as much as what the pile represented, and the last hundred dollars he had wagered had exhausted his ready cash.

Three persons had been watching the game over the Easterner's shoulder—one a young man, handsome and dashing of appearance; the second an old man, weather-beaten, wrinkled and gray-haired; the third, a youth, sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a mischief-expressed face.

These three evidently were accustomed to frontier experience, and, from appearances, knew each other, and were traveling together, for they were strangers in the camp, and had been regarded by the denizens of the joint with suspicion for some minutes—even by gigantic Wah Lee.

In fact, they were none others than the redoubtable Deadwood Dick Junior, his boy companion Johnny Smile, and that veteran and renowned prince of bordermen, the hero of hundreds of adventures and hairbreadth escapes—Old Avalanche—a name immortalized in connection with wild western deeds of bravery.

May his name ever remain fresh in the memory of this generation, and those to come!

There was no particular change in either Dick or his young companion, since last we met them in Pistol Pocket; but the Great Annihilator looked older considerably, and his war-scarred visage seemed sad, as if he had lost some dear and beloved friend.

And he had!

Several weeks prior to our story he had been attacked by a band of river roughs, near old Fort Ruford, and his two famous and faithful companions of many a scrimmage, Prudence Cordelia, the mule, and Jeremiah, the wonderful goat, had been killed.

The loss fell heavily upon him, and he tried to bear up under it with fortitude, and within a few days had secured a jack-mule to fill the vacancy, because the aforesaid jack was as scrawny and ugly looking as was the lamented Prudence.

Later he had met Deadwood Dick and Johnny Smile, by appointment, and they had come together to Bismarck—on what errand, we shall see.

"Well! what are you going to do?" Black Bud demanded, as Luke Lenton looked over his cards. "Goin' to play?"

"Of course I am!" was the reply, and taking a check-book from his pocket, he hastily wrote out a check on a Boston bank for fifteen hundred dollars.

"There!" he said, laying it on the pile. "I see your five and go you ten better!"

Black Bud picked up the check, glanced at it, and then threw it down, with a shrug.

"Bah! that's no good!" he declared. "Cash is what talks in this game, so if ye'r goin' to play, slap down the dudads!"

"I have no more money with me," Lenton said, anxiously, "but the check is perfectly good, as I have money in bank, in Boston. Or, should you win, bring the check to me, in Bismarck, to-morrow, and I will cash it!"

"Nary time, me royal duke! I don't do that kind o' business, 'cause I ain't built that way, ye see. Jest slap down the money or I'll rake in the pot!" and reaching forth his hand, the gambler laid it upon the stakes.

"Hands off!" cried a stern voice, and the next instant, Deadwood Dick's revolver gazed warningly into Black Bud's face. "That money don't belong to you, my man, until it is fairly won!"

The gambler withdrew his hand, as ordered. "Who the deuce are you?" he demanded, fiercely.

"I am Deadwood Dick!" was the cool reply, "and I am likewise one of the firm of Three Aces and A Jack! I and these two friends of mine,"—indicating Old Avalanche and Johnny Smile—"constitute the Three Aces, and the Jack is outside, and you bet, as a whole we are a winning hand! If you have any doubts about the matter, just attempt to rake in that pot!"

"Cuss ye, what bizness hev ye got to meddle wi' the game!" Black Bud roared, growing red with rage. "The feller can't cover the pile with money, and I ain't obliged to take his check, so he's froze out, an' the pot is mine!"

"Not by a long shot!" Dick declared. "If the gentleman wants his check cashed, I reckon I can accommodate him. Let me see your check, friend."

Lenton obeyed, at the same time surveying Dick and the other two "Aces," wonderingly.

This unexpected and accommodating offer was surprising to him.

Dick looked at the check, and then tore it up.

"Draw up another check, payable to the order of Richard Bristol," he said, "and you shall have the money."

Lenton hastened to do so, while Dick counted out from a roll of bills, fifteen one hundred dollar notes.

Though furious with rage, Black Bud dared make no hostile demonstration, for Old Avalanche kept him covered.

As soon as Lenton received the money, he deposited it on top of the other stakes.

"Now, then!" he said, "what will you do?"

"Call you!" Black Bud cried, putting a thousand dollars into the pot, and laying down four Kings.

"They're good, but not good enough!" Lenton replied, laying down four aces. "The pot is mine, mister," and reaching forward, he raked it in.

Then, rising quickly, he made a dash for the door, and was out of the room before any one could hardly realize what had happened.

At the same time, every lamp went out, and the room was left in darkness!

CHAPTER III.

THE SHADOW OF CONSPIRACY GROWS LARGER.

So suddenly had the lights gone out, that the Three Aces were left, for a minute, in a state of bewilderment; then Dick, comprehending that they were in a trap, cried to his companions:

"Look out for yourself, boys! Scoot!"

As he uttered the words there was a flash in front of him and a bullet tinged his ear.

The answer was the report of his own revolver and a yell of human pain succeeded.

For the space of several seconds the sharp reports, coupled with yells and curses, made, literally, a pandemonium.

Directly, a light was produced, and the firing ceased.

The room was a scene of disorder and confusion—tables and chairs had been overturned; several men had been more or less dangerously wounded, while Van Scooter, Black Bud's pal, was killed. Black Bud himself was wounded in the left arm.

When search was made for the "Three Aces,"

it was found that they had disappeared, and as they had doubtless got safely across "The Border," no attempt at pursuit was given.

Black Bud and Wah Lee held a private conference. The substance of what passed between them will be made known later on.

It was after eight o'clock when the door opened and Duncan McDonald entered the joint. He was muffled up in a big overcoat, but not otherwise disguised.

His arrival created no particular surprise, for he nodded to Wah Lee and Bud, and passed on down the room to the bar, where he procured and lit a cigar; then he sauntered leisurely about the place, pausing now and then to watch some game of more than passing interest.

Finally he entered one of the side rooms and seated himself at a table, where he was soon after joined by Black Bud, who also became seated.

"Do you want me?" the gambler asked, lighting his pipe.

"No, not particularly. What luck to-night, at cards?"

"Deuced poor!" and Bud exhibited his wounded arm. "I got cleaned out at poker, and had a narrow chance for my life in the bargain."

"Why, how's that?"

Bud explained in detail, and Duncan McDonald scowled as he listened.

"This is bad!" he grunted. "I've heard tell of this Deadwood Dick and Old Avalanche, and, if report be true, they're two of the shrewdest detectives in the West, as well as the most relentless and successful. Their coming here, and visiting the joint, means no good to us, I'll wager, and the matter must be looked into. But, who was this chap you played with, who skipped out with the money?"

"A Boston dude, I reckon; leastwise, he offered me a check on the Boston bank."

"Ah! what was his name?"

"I didn't ask him."

"But you saw the name on the check?"

Black Bud scratched his head.

"Blamed if I know!" he declared. "Let me see: strikes me it was something like Lent—Ah! I have it—Luke Lenton."

Duncan McDonald started violently.

"Luke Lenton!" he gasped. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, that was the name—at least it's the name that was attached to the check."

McDonald's face assumed an anxious expression, and he drummed on the floor with his foot.

"What sort of a looking fellow was this Lenton, and about how old?" he asked.

"Oh, he was a pretty good-looking chap, and about twenty-one or twenty-two years old, I should say."

"Would you know him again if you were to see him?"

"I reckon."

"Then listen. That fellow must be captured at once, brought here, and held a prisoner until I see fit to liberate him. You must attend to the job. Take Chi Ching, the Thug, and two or three of his men, dog this fellow's footsteps until you have an opportunity to effect his capture without creating a sensation. Here are two hundred dollars, and two more will be forthcoming as soon as the job is done. No time must be lost."

"All right, Cap; I'll look after the chap 'twixt now and morning. How about them Three Aces?"

"They also must be closely watched, and if it is found that they intend to meddle in our affairs, they must be rapped on the head. But leave that matter to me. You go ahead and capture this Luke Lenton, for in his capture lies my safety and yours."

"Mine? How do you mean?"

"I cannot explain, now, but you know as well as I that, were I to get into trouble, it would be disastrous to our mutual interests!"

Black Bud arose from the table.

"That's so!" he assented. "Now that we have got the thing working so systematically, it won't do to brook any foreign interference. I'll hunt up the Thug, and we will set to work at once. Good-night," and the gambler left the room.

He had not been gone five minutes, when Professor Lucius Pillbury entered the little den where Duncan McDonald was seated.

"Ah! here so soon?" he said, taking a chair.

"I thought I was early."

"But you are not," McDonald replied. "It is allready on toward nine o'clock, and I have been waiting for you."

"Well, what is the word? What do you want?"

"I want to know what you made out of that fellow who called at your office, to-day?"

"Not much! He simply made a few inquiries in regard to the value of real estate in and about Bismarck, and after receiving what information I was able to give him, he feed me to the tune of a ten dollar note, and took his departure."

"What was his name?"

"Clay Coleman."

"Humph!" and McDonald shrugged his shoulders, significantly. "Too fine a cognomen, by half, to be true!" he said. "Professor, that fellow was a spy!"

"Bah!"

"I say yes. He was a spy. I felt it, the moment I saw him?"

"From Washington?"

"Most likely."

"Pshaw! Why should the authorities send a spy here? Not the slightest hint of the game has got abroad."

"I am not sure of that. There are strange detectives prowling around!"

He then told of the visit of the Three Aces to the joint, adding:

"You are aware that the last batch was shoved prematurely, and all too carelessly, and it is my opinion that these sleuth-hounds of the law have struck the scent, and are here to ferret out the matter. If this Clay Coleman is, as I suspect, a detective, it is not improbable that he is working in collusion with these hawks who style themselves the Three Aces."

"Perhaps!" Pillbury said, rather gloomily.

"If so, what then?"

"Why, they must be done for, without delay. We've too much at stake to have them nosing around, and don't you forget it! It's a very unfortunate thing that Coleman was a witness to that will."

"Yes, but it could not be helped. If we had made serious objections, Fairfax would never have signed the document."

"True. He was inclined to be suspicious, as it was, I think. When will the policy be here?"

"It came to-night. I sent in a counterfeit application, purporting to have been signed by Fairfax, and the policy came to hand to-night. So, if Fairfax were dead at this minute, the policy would hold good!"

"Capital, you're a jewel, professor. If this is the case, there must be no delay in getting rid of the fellow. Have you everything in readiness?"

"Every detail is arranged. All you have to do is to say the word, and I will set the machine in motion. To-night would be a capital night!"

"We must not act too hastily. I must see the old woman before anything definite is done. If we should make a botch of the job, and the detectives should get onto it, the country would not be big enough to hold us. We'd better split, now. You go to your office, and wait there. I will join you before morning, and then we will fix up all the details."

"All right. The sooner the job's over the better, for it ain't a pleasant thing to have on one's mind."

They both left the room.

Unknown to them, in the next apartment, or booth, a man had been an attentive listener to the foregoing conversation, and when the two scoundrels had departed, this man softly raised a window in his apartment, and clambered out of it into the night.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FEMALE MISER.

In one of the principal dwelling streets of Bismarck, surrounded by a fringe of sighing elms, stood a large square frame dwelling, the windows of which were guarded by heavy shutters. When the shutters were open, the building had the appearance of a jail, for the windows were also guarded by heavy iron bars. But it was seldom that more than one or two of the shutters were open at a time.

The house had never been painted, and was so weather-beaten that it presented a forbidding appearance.

The grounds surrounding this house were grown up with weeds, the fence was out of order, and everywhere was a general appearance of neglect.

Here resided Peggy Parkhurst, the female miser, and here she had dwelt from the time Bismarck had become a town of any importance—alone and unattended, a recluse from the outside world.

She was never seen beyond the portals of her own doorway, and had few if any visitors, as

she positively refused to have any association with her neighbors, or admit them to her house.

The grocer delivered her provisions at the door, and received his pay, and whatever other purchases she made, were delivered in a like manner.

Little of her antecedents was known to the people of Bismarck. Once a month, she received from Boston, by Express, a money package, marked \$200.00, and sent by John Jones. This was invariably delivered to her by messenger, at the door.

Some one had started a rumor that the old woman had a large fortune in money stored away in the house; also that she was the discarded wife of a rich Boston banker, who, by illegally contracting a second marriage, had placed himself in her power, and the money sent her, regularly, was used to purchase her silence.

But, there were no vouchers for either of these reports, and hence public curiosity had to go unsatisfied.

For something like a week previous a doctor had visited the house, twice a day, but to all inquiries he remained mute.

Peggy Parkhurst was a tall, gaunt, large-boned woman, with a hard-lined, vinegary visage, sharp, black eyes, and straggling gray hair. While she may have, in early life, possessed more than ordinary good looks, that day had long since passed, and her habitual expression of countenance, now, was surly and repellent.

One of her peculiarities was that she always dressed in a flowing robe of black silk, which added to rather than detracted from her somber appearance.

On the night which witnessed the events of the preceding chapter, the blizzard raged about the Parkhurst mansion with fearful velocity and weird effect.

The wind shrieked through the leafless branches of the elms, and snow swirled around the corners of the weather-beaten house in blinding drifts.

But one of the shutters was open, in the second story, and from that window shone a light.

It was past midnight, when a man muffled in a great-coat mounted the steps of the mansion, and, unlocking the door, entered a dark, musty-smelling hall.

Closing the door, he groped his way up a carpeted stairway, and at last arrived upon the second floor, and entered a room, where a lamp was burning on a table.

The room was well furnished, with a comfortable bed, easy-chairs, a coal stove, Brussels carpet, pictures on the wall, and the numerous conveniences and comforts of a genteel home.

One startling peculiarity was that which occupied one corner of the room, and this was a large coffin-box, whose lid being off, revealed within it a handsomely mounted rosewood coffin; truly a sepulchral ornament for a bed-chamber.

Bolstered up in a high-backed, Turkish chair, near the fire, was Peggy Parkhurst, the recluse.

She was now attired in a white gown, and her feet were incased in white kid slippers. Her face was deathly white, her cheeks and eyes sunken, and the latter wore a wild, glassy expression. Her hands, resting in her lap, were clasped tightly together.

She looked up with a slight frown, at the entrance of her visitor, who, on unbuttoning his coat, revealed himself to be Duncan McDonald.

"Humph! what brings you here, at this hour, and in such a storm?" she demanded, as he seated himself near the fire.

"I came to see you, aunty, of course," he replied, "but little expected to see you sitting up, for I met Doctor Disco, and he said you were much worse."

"So I am, but I cannot lie down. I shall die in my chair, as you see me, now. Ah! death would indeed be welcome if I could but have my poor children with me in my last moments."

"Alas! aunty, I fear that cannot be," McDonald said, unctuously. "I have exhausted every means in my power to find them, but without success."

"But, what have you learned? You have told me repeatedly that you were searching, but never have you told me just what you have learned!"

"Well, it is very little there is to tell, you can believe. Bates died in Boston, six months ago, and immediately afterward, your son, Burton, disappeared, and has not been seen or heard from since. As near as I can learn, Bates died in impoverished circumstances. As for Frances, there is no hope of ever finding her. After your separation, Bates bound the girl out to a family named Fulton, who soon after emigrated to the West, and have never since been heard from."

"So you see, aunty, that there is not the slightest probability that you will ever hear from your children, for I understand that Burton and his father had not been on speaking terms for a number of years, and it is not likely the old man told him anything of his early life!"

The old woman bowed her chin in her hands, and gazed thoughtfully at the fire.

"Did you advertise, as I directed?" she asked.

"I did. The five hundred dollars you gave me, were judiciously expended for that purpose, and, in addition, I used a couple of hundred of my own. But all to no avail."

"The fact is, aunty, there is no use of your cherishing any further hopes of ever seeing your children, as I am satisfied that they are as completely lost from you as though they were at the bottom of the sea."

"Well, maybe you are right," Peggy said, slowly. "I presume I shall never see them—no! never! I am satisfied that I have but a few more hours to live. But, if I cannot meet them in this life, I shall hope to in the next."

"Yes, that is about the most reasonable way to look at it. By the way, I suppose you have made all necessary provisions, pending your probable demise?"

"Provisions?"

"Yes—that is to say, I presume you have made your—your will."

Peggy Parkhurst's face assumed a grim expression, and her eyes gleamed with a peculiar light.

"Duncan McDonald!" she cried, "haven't I told you repeatedly that I have no need to make a will, having nothing to bequeath?"

McDonald smiled, disagreeably.

"I believe you have remarked something to that effect, aunty," he said, but, then, you see, I don't believe a word of it. It don't stand to reason. Here, for years, you have been receiving twenty-four hundred dollars a year hush-money, from Bates. Your miserly way of living has made it impossible for you to expend any considerable part of this income. Twenty-four hundred a year, for—well say fifteen years, would amount to thirty-six thousand dollars; so accordingly, I should judge that you must have at least thirty thousand tucked away in your stocking, for a rainy day!"

"Well! supposing I had a hundred thousand laid away—what of it?" she snapped.

"Why, in that case, I should suppose you would want to make some disposal of it prior to your death!" the schemer replied.

"In other words, you would suggest that I leave it to you, eh?"

"As it is not likely your children will ever come to light, aunty, I fail to see how you could better dispose of it. I should think I ought to have a stronger claim upon your affection and generosity than an utter stranger!"

"Very true, Duncan McDonald, but, set your mind at rest on one point—my death will never enrich you. I have not over a hundred dollars in the world, and that is in the hands of the undertaker, who will bury me. What money I may have had, heretofore, has gone for charitable purposes, and so, if you have entertained any hopes of becoming my heir, you are doomed to disappointment. This house and what furniture is in it, is all mortgaged, and so I have nothing to leave behind, for any one to wrangle over."

"Oh! I never entertained any such idea, as becoming your heir, until since my persistent efforts to find your children failed!" Duncan declared, with apparent carelessness. "Failing to find them, and believing you to be possessed of some wealth, I naturally had some hopes that you would remember me. However, as you have nothing to leave, we will let the matter drop. Is there anything I can do for you, before I go?"

"No! nothing. I prefer to be alone with my thoughts!"

"Very well. I will take leave now, and bid you good-night, but not good-by, for when I call in the morning, I shall hope and expect to see you feeling better!"

"Yes! perhaps I shall be far better off, than now!" Peggy said, with a sigh.

Duncan McDonald made no reply, but arose, buttoned up his overcoat, and left the room, a strangely evil expression upon his face—a face of diabolical triumph.

CHAPTER V.

DICK'S NOCTURNAL ADVENTURE.

DUNCAN McDONALD had barely left the room, when Peggy Parkhurst arose from her easy-chair with alacrity hardly to be expected of a woman purporting to be upon the verge of the grave.

"The villain!" she hissed, her hands clinching

tighter together, and her eyes gleaming with a new-born resolve. "Foiled in his aim of becoming my heir, I wonder if he will lurk about the house and seek to murder me!"

She stole softly to the door, and as softly opened it and listened.

She heard McDonald's heavy footsteps descending the staircase, and then heard a door slam; but, not wholly satisfied, she hastened to the window of her room in time to see him crossing the lawn.

"Ah!" she muttered, with a sigh of relief. "I was afraid he would stay in the house."

She staggered back to her chair, where she sat down, gazing moodily into the fire.

"I wonder if he has been searching for my children?" she soliloquized musingly. "I don't believe it; or, if he has been searching, he has no doubt found them, and put them off the track of finding me."

"Alas! I fear they will never find me, nor even their poor wronged mother's grave. To-night is the night the Creator set for my spirit's return to them, and I know ere morning I shall be dead."

"Oh! how long and patiently have I waited for this night to come, and yet hoped to have my son and daughter with me when I passed away! But, it has been a vain hope, and I now full well realize that I must die without seeing them."

"The money! Ha! ha! You shall not have it, Duncan McDonald, even though you have long set your heart upon its possession. Very attentive have you been to me, indeed, these several years, in hopes I would make you my heir, where, otherwise, you would have despised me. But, you couldn't fool Peggy Parkhurst—oh, no!"

"The money shall benefit no one, except to make nests for the worms of the earth."

She chuckled grimly, and once more arose from her chair.

Placing two chairs a little ways apart, she then lifted the coffin from the box, and with a strength she did not seem capable of, placed one end on either chair.

Next she removed the lid, and laid it one side.

"There!" she muttered, gazing into the satin-lined receptacle. "Here is my last resting-place, after a life of loneliness and sorrow. Ah! how welcome and cheerful the place looks, compared to the cold, pitiless world that has been so unkind to me."

With tender hands she raised the satin cushions on the bottom of the coffin, and behold! the entire bottom was covered with layer after layer of greenbacks, a score thick!

Those on top were of large denominations, some as large as five hundred dollars!

The recluse gazed at her treasure for a few minutes, thoughtfully; then carefully replaced the cushions, and glanced at the clock which ticked away solemnly on the mantle.

"The hour is fast approaching," she mused, going to the window and peering out into the wild, stormy night. "Would to God I could see some honest person before I am called away!"

She paced the room awhile, and then, seeming to have worked herself up into a high pitch of nervous excitement, she slipped on a pair of rubber boots, enveloped her figure in a heavy-hooded cloak, left the house and went down to the gate.

Here she stood, shivering in the blinding blizzard, waiting for some one to come along.

It was fully half an hour, ere a muffled man came stumbling along through the snow, and she hailed him.

"Well, what is it?" he demanded, rather gruffly, as he drew up at the gate.

"If you please, sir, I am very ill, and do not expect to live the night out, and before I die I want some one to speak to," was the reply. "If you will come into the house a few minutes, I will be very grateful."

"Of course I'll come in!" was the reply. "I'd go into a morgue to get out of a storm like this."

Accordingly, Peggy Parkhurst led the way across the lawn. She staggered, and would have fallen several times, had not the young stranger supported her.

At last they reached the recluse's chamber, and Peggy sunk into her chair, shivering and exhausted.

When the man turned down the collar of his coat, the pleasant, handsome face of Deadwood Dick, Junior, was revealed.

After a searching look at him, Peggy finally regained her breath sufficiently so that she could speak.

Then she directed him to get her a flask of whisky, which stood upon the table, and after she had partaken of it, she said:

"Ah! I shall feel a little better, now. That will put new life into me for a little while."

"You should not have exposed yourself in the storm, madam," Dick observed. "Have you no neighbor you could have called in?"

"No, nor do I want any. They're all an inquisitive, meddling set of fools, and they know enough to keep their distance, you bet!"

"You said you were sick, madam? What appears to be the nature of your malady?"

"Nothing ails me, in particular, except that this is the night set by the Lord for me to depart this life, and, ere sunrise, my spirit will have taken its flight!"

Dick could not repress a smile at the idea of her predicting the hour of her own death.

"Oh! you needn't smile!" Peggy continued, noticing his evident disbelief, "for I shall certainly be called away. I have been aware of the fact for a year, and have eagerly watched for this night to arrive, for I am tired of living. I have made all arrangements for death, with one exception. See! yonder is my coffin. When I lie down in that, by-and-by, it will be never to rise again in this life!"

"Pshaw! That's all nonsense!" Dick declared. "I'm inclined to think you're crazy."

"Indeed I am not! Over a year ago I received a divine warning that I would die this night, and die I shall. Already I feel the icy clutch of death tightening upon me. I have been failing steadily, and have no doubt but that daybreak will see me a corpse. Who are you? What is your name?"

"My name is Dick Bristol."

"Your business?"

"Oh! a little of everything, and not much of anything—a nomad, generally; a detective sometimes. I am known as Deadwood Dick, Junior."

"Deadwood Dick, Junior? Is it possible? Of all men you are the very person I could most wish to see. I have work for you, Mr. Bristol—work you alone can do. Somewhere about this country, I have a son and daughter, who have been lost to me for years, owing to early separation from my husband, Butler Bates. My son's name is Burton Bates, and my daughter, having been adopted out, probably bears the name of Frances Fulton. These two children of mine I want you to find."

Here the recluse drew some money and papers from her pocket.

"This," she continued, handing Dick a foolscap sheet of paper, closely covered with writing, "will give you all the information you need to start to work on. And here are five thousand dollars. Spend what is necessary to find my son and daughter, and keep the balance for your services. Here"—handing him a sealed envelope—"is my will, which bequeaths my fortune to my children, and explains where said fortune is to be obtained. This will is not to be opened until both my son and daughter are found."

"Now, sir, will you take charge of this matter for me?"

"Well, as I am not particularly engaged at present, there is nothing to prevent my undertaking the search. But you'd better chuck that coffin into the stove, and give up the idea of dying, my dear madame!"

"No! no! That is impossible. My fate is sealed, for I have been called, and must respond. I want to be alone, so I will excuse you now. Faithfully fulfill your mission, and God will bless you. You may call in the morning, and if I am alive, I may have something to say to you!"

And so pocketing the money and the papers she had given him, Dick bade her good-by, and took his departure, marveling not a little over the new mission that had been so unexpectedly thrust upon him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRE.

THE Fairfaxes, Fred and Fanny, lived in a suit of three rooms, over the grocery store where the former worked, the proprietor of the store residing in another and quite distant part of the town.

Although they had been married less than six months, the happy couple had, by strict economy, succeeded in furnishing their little home quite cosily, and, as Fred got his provisions at the cheapest rates, they were able to have little delicacies not to be found on the table of many well-to-do people.

Indeed, but for the sad fact of Fred's declining health, a happier home would have been hard to find.

Fanny, Fred's wife, was a bonny little girl-wife, *petite*, piquant and pretty, and possessed

of a sunny nature that was bound to dispel gloom wherever she went. She was a model housekeeper, and everything about her home was neatness personified.

Fred Fairfax had first met the object of his adoration at the house of an acquaintance, where she was doing some sewing. After the introduction, their acquaintance ripened rapidly into love, for Fred learned that Fanny was all alone in the world, having recently lost her adopted parents, in Yankton, and had been forced to go out by day's work to earn a living; and, as he himself was an orphan, he had for some time been debating the advisability of taking to himself a wife.

Therefore, as he and Fanny seemed well suited for each other, it was but a natural consequence that they should fall in love and get married.

The evening when we again introduce Fred, saw the happy couple seated at the supper-table, chatting pleasantly, and little aware of the dark cloud that overhung their future.

"Fanny, dear," Fred was saying, "you have never told me about your life, prior to our marriage."

"Because there is really nothing much to tell," Fanny laughed. "Up to the time papa and mamma died, my life was rather humdrum, composed principally of 'get up, eat, go to school, come home, eat, and go to bed!'"

"Did you never have any lovers?"

"Oh! I don't know. Several young men used to pay me attentions, but I never counted them as lovers."

"The Fultons were not your own parents?"

"Oh! no, but I loved them just the same as though they were. They adopted me when I was quite small, from a rich man named Bates, who had lost his wife, but they would never tell me where the man lived, and so, as there are so many Bateses in the country, I had no means of knowing which particular one was my father."

"Strange the Fultons did not tell you."

"Oh! they were afraid if they did, they would lose me. But, Fred, you have never told me what you were before we met!"

Fred laughed.

"Oh! I was an actor!"

"An actor?"

"Yes, an actor—a 'snap' actor, I have essayed every part from Hamlet to a bullwhacker in a blood-and-thunder drama. But, alas! those days are over, and I am afraid my days are too, or nearly so."

Fanny was by his side in an instant, with her arms entwined lovingly about his neck.

"Oh, no, Fred," she said, "you must not say that. You must not be despondent, for I am sure you will get better. What would I ever do without you?"

"Oh, well, we'll not talk of that," Fred replied. "I'm better than a couple of dead men yet. By the way, dear, did you ever hear of a man named Duncan McDonald?"

"Duncan McDonald?" And Fanny flushed a little.

"I have heard of him," she answered, slowly, averting her gaze from her husband.

"Is that all? Did you ever know him—do you know him?"

"I do not know him. I met him several times in society in Yankton, and he pressed his attentions upon me, and asked me to marry him. As I had a thorough dislike for him, I of course promptly rejected his suit, and he left me in anger. He never spoke to me after that, and although we have met several times since I came to Bismarck, we have passed as strangers. But why do you ask?"

"Oh, simply because the fellow has sought to make my acquaintance, and I didn't know but that it was because he had some time previously known you," Fred replied, carelessly.

While his thoughts ran in a different channel.

"That fellow is a villain," he mused, "and his getting me to have my life insured is but part of a diabolical scheme he has been hatching up against me and Fanny. But I'll foil him, for I'll cancel the insurance and destroy the will, and let him know what I think of him!"

Later in the evening, when the young husband and wife were still talking over their affairs, there came a rap at the door.

On answering the summons, Fred found a boy outside with a message for Mrs. Fairfax.

The boy was invited inside, and the message was opened. It proved to be from Fred's employer, and read as follows:

"MRS. FAIRFAX—Mrs. La Force is very ill, and our servant having left us, she is without lady's attendance, and would like, if possible, Mrs. Fairfax to come and spend the night with her. If you can come, the bearer will show you the way."

"Respectfully yours, JNO. J. LA FORCE."

After reading the note, Fred glanced at his wife.

"You had better send back word that owing to the terrible storm you cannot come, Fanny," he said anxiously.

"Oh, no, Fred, I cannot do that," she quickly replied. "You know how very kind both Mr. and Mrs. La Force have been to us, and it would be shameful to refuse so small a favor. Besides, I'll bundle up well, and put on your rubber boots over my shoes, and I shall not mind the storm a bit."

"Well, do as you think best, dear. But you know it is quite a distance."

"Oh! I shall not mind it. I love to get out in a storm!" replied Fanny, whose spirits were ever gay and buoyant.

And so that settled it.

She hurriedly got ready, and then kissing her husband good-night, she and the lad took their departure.

Lighting his pipe, Fred threw himself down on the lounge and began to read, for he rarely retired before midnight.

Down-stairs, the grocery store was wrapped in darkness.

But, that did not signify that it was unoccupied, for in a dark corner, partly screened by barrels and boxes, a man muffled in a great overcoat, was crouching in silence.

The dwelling rooms occupied by the Fairfaxes, were reached by a stairway leading from the store, and also by a covered outside staircase leading up from the street.

The man crouching behind the barrels seemed to grow impatient as the minutes dragged by, for he shifted uneasily, and occasionally uttered a low growl.

Fully ten minutes passed, then a footstep sounded on the floor of the grocery, and a second man joined the one behind the boxes.

"Well, what's the word?" the latter demanded, in a low tone.

"All's ready!" was the gruff reply. "The chloroform has done its work, and he sleeps like a log."

"Good. Are both doors locked?"

"Yes. There is no way for escape, except by one of the windows."

"Well, then, let her go, and we'll make tracks before the fire makes any headway!"

The second man gave a grunt of assent, and hastened preparations for departure.

Near at hand was a large tin oil can, holding nearly a barrel and supplied with a faucet for drawing the oil.

Stepping to this can, the fire-bug turned on the faucet, and the oil began to gush forth and run over the floor. In a few seconds, nearly the entire floor was submerged with the liquid.

The two men then made their way to the front door, opened it and fastened it open; then, one of the villains threw a lighted match back into the store, after which both ran away, as fast as their legs could carry them.

An instant later the interior of the grocery was one mass of seething flame, which, fanned by the fierce wind that blew in through the open door, gave forth a loud roar which could be heard a block away.

It was fully five minutes ere the fire was discovered and an alarm sent forth, that brought a swarm of people to the scene of the conflagration.

By this time the entire building was a mass of roaring flames, and it was an utter impossibility for the firemen to gain entrance to the second story, where the Fairfaxes lived.

The wind, blowing at the rate of forty miles an hour, caused the flames to leap high toward the heavens, lighting up the country for a great distance around.

Several other buildings were in imminent danger, but the prompt efforts of the people prevented what would otherwise have been a disastrous conflagration.

A shuddering crowd was gathered about the doomed grocery, expecting to hear the shrieks of Fred and Fanny Fairfax, whom they naturally believed to be in the burning building; but they heard no outcry, and could come to no other conclusion than that Fred and Fanny had been suffocated by the smoke, ere the flames reached them.

The fire ate up the dry wooden structure like so much straw, and within an hour's time nothing remained of the grocery but a heap of glowing embers.

Nevertheless, a crowd hovered about the vicinity, anxiously watching the firemen, who, with long rakes, sought to find the bones of Fred and Fanny Fairfax.

But, though they searched diligently, no bones were to be found.

CHAPTER VII.

BLUFFING THE SHERIFF.

WHEN Fanny Fairfax reached the La Force residence, she found, greatly to her surprise, that Mrs. La Force was quite well, and that she had not been sent for at all.

The lad who had delivered the message, and who had acted as her guide, had left her just before they reached the La Force mansion, and hurried back toward the heart of the town.

She had never seen him before, and did not know who he was.

The La Forces were very indignant that their names should have been the means of drawing her forth through such a storm and at night, and insisted that she should remain their guest until morning.

It was only after a deal of urging that she consented, for she was very much worried and mystified over the message, and fearful that some harm might come to her husband.

The La Forces retired quite early, and of course Mrs. Fairfax had to do the same.

The next morning, after breakfast, Mr. La Force, as gently as possible, broke the news to her of the burning of the grocery store, and the probable death of Fred Fairfax.

Very naturally Fanny went into hysterics, and from hysterics into a deathly swoon, from which she did not arouse for many hours.

In the mean time, Bismarck was greatly excited over the fire, and the tragic fate of Fred Fairfax, who was highly respected by all who knew him.

That the fire was purely incendiary, there was not a doubt in the minds of the people, owing to the fact that when the fire was first discovered, the store door was wide open.

Mr. La Force, who owned the property, promptly offered a large reward for the capture of the miscreant who fired the premises, and, in addition, employed a local detective to ferret out the mystery.

The most thorough search, among the ruins of the burned building failed to find any bones of Fred Fairfax. If he had been a victim of the mad flames, as there seemed to be no reason to doubt, he must certainly have been cremated to ashes.

The sensation created by the fire, was supplemented by another—the announcement of the death of Peggy Parkhurst. The announcement was made by Dr. Disco, who had charge of the funeral arrangements, and stated that he had been authorized by the deceased to allow no one to view the remains, except the undertaker.

A curious crowd besieged the house, but were not admitted. Even Deadwood Dick was refused admittance. Late in the afternoon, the storm having abated, the undertaker's wagon took the coffin containing the dead woman to the cemetery, and buried it, after which, at the direction of the doctor, two policemen were placed on guard to prevent the body from being disturbed by any curiously-disposed or evil-minded persons.

On the following day, stated the doctor, two local detectives would take the place of the policemen, and do guard duty for one month, money having been left the doctor by the deceased to be appropriated for this purpose.

There was no minister, no funeral—the only ones present at the burial being the doctor, undertaker, Deadwood Dick, and two or three citizens.

A third sensation of the day, was the discovery that a large local jewelry establishment had been burglarized, during the previous night, and something like five thousand dollars' worth of watches, rings and diamonds stolen.

The job had evidently been done by burglars who understood their business, for a rear window had been removed, and the safe door blown open with dynamite, or some other powerful explosive.

Further than these evidences of the crime, no clew to the authors could be found.

The Three—Deadwood Dick, Old Avalanche, and Johnny Smile—were comfortably quartered at the principal hotel, and were seated in the reading-room, in conversation, a couple of hours after the burial of Peggy Parkhurst, when they were approached by two men, one of whom was Duncan McDonald.

McDonald's companion was a broad-shouldered, brawny individual, of rather prepossessing appearance, and the trio at once concluded that he was a person of some importance. When the two men came to a halt before the trio, it was McDonald who spoke first, directing his remarks to Deadwood Dick.

"I trust you will excuse me for interrupting you, sir!" he said, "but I believe you and I have met before."

"Ah! have we? Hum! I don't seem to remember!" Dick replied, coolly. "Haven't you made a mistake?"

"Oh! no. Notwithstanding your disguise, I recognize you. Yesterday, in the rôle of Clay Coleman, you sported a luxuriant beard. Today, as Deadwood Dick, you appear as your original self!"

"Indeed! You seem quite sure you are right?"

"Oh! I am right. I want to introduce you to a friend of mine, Sheriff Shields. Sheriff, this is Deadwood Dick!"

The sheriff bowed, in acknowledgment of the introduction, and Dick could do no less than give a slight inclination of the head.

McDonald continued:

"Now, then, that you two gentlemen know each other, I will let the sheriff speak for himself. He wanted to know who you were, and so I offered to introduce him."

"Oh! you are extremely kind!" Dick said dryly. Then, turning to the sheriff, he continued:

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Well—ahem!—you see," replied Shields, "I am sheriff of this county, and it is naturally my business to keep an eye on everybody in my district, in order to maintain a fair degree of peace and security."

"You see, for some months past, Bismarck has become the prey of an organized band of burglars, who have conducted their nefarious business so cunningly and systematically as to defy detection, and I have finally concluded that the Bismarck gang is but a part of a gang that is doing up Yankton."

"Detective McDonald, here, and myself, have been working to unearth these scoundrels, and therefore, we have to keep ourselves on the alert, you know, and suspect all strangers who cannot satisfy us of their innocence!"

"Which is the same as saying that you suspect me, eh?" Dick suggested, coolly.

"Well, I haven't said so yet!" the sheriff declared, somewhat apologetically. "But, you see, you and your companions were pointed out to me by a citizen, yesterday, who asked me who you were, and advised me to find out and what your business was in Bismarck."

"Indeed! One would infer by that that a person cannot visit this town without having his affairs investigated!"

"Well, that is altogether optional with me. If I believe a person to be a suspicious character, I have the right to know what is his business. Several strange things have happened within the past forty-eight hours, which need investigating. First, the mysterious burning of La Force's grocery, in which Fred Fairfax lost his life; second, the burglary at the store of Schwartz & Co., and lastly, the sudden death of Miss Peggy Parkhurst."

"Mr. McDonald, here, the only living relative of the deceased woman, has had her house searched, but failed to find any trace of the fortune she was known to have stored away, and he has come to the conclusion that her house was burglarized, during the past night, after she had expired."

"All things considered, you being the only strangers who have arrived in town for some days, it stands to reason that you should be suspected, and it is my duty to put you under arrest, until I am satisfied of your innocence!"

Deadwood Dick arose, his eyes flashing sternly.

"I don't think you will do anything of the kind!" he declared. "I presume I can satisfy you as to who and what I am without submitting to arrest, and, as for my companions, they are in my employ, and I can vouch for them."

"Well, how are you going to satisfy me? What is your business in Bismarck?" sharply demanded the sheriff.

"What our business is is none of your business, sir!" was Deadwood Dick's curt retort. "If you will examine this commission, you will find who and what I am; further than that you have no need to know!"

As he spoke, Dick drew a legal-looking document from his pocket, and handed it to the sheriff. Shields subjected it to a careful examination, a look of surprise coming over his face.

"Richard Bristol, United States detective, eh?" he said. "Hum! this is news. How long have you held this position, sir?"

"You see the date the commission was issued, do you not?"

"Yes. But, you will excuse me if I say I rather doubt the validity of this document. What particular detective feat won you this appointment?"

"That is emphatically none of your business!"

"Sir!"

"You heard the gentle murmur of my voice!"

"You had better be more civil, young man, or I'll arrest the three of you, and put you in irons! You are entirely too fresh!"

"I am just fresh enough that I am not to be bullied by you!" Dick retorted. "If I know anything, my authority exceeds yours, and if you don't keep a civil tongue in your head, I'll put you under arrest!"

Shields uttered an oath, and turning, strode abruptly away, followed by McDonald.

Deadwood Dick gazed after him until he had disappeared, and then turned to Old Avalanche, who, with Johnny Smile, had been an attentive listener.

"I guess I've shut him up!" Richard remarked. "I guess he knows better than to tackle me!"

"I dunno about that!" the Annihilator grunted. "He didn't go off feelin' werry good-natured, an' that feller with him aire wuss than enny snake that ever wiggled. Ef we don't see trouble afore long, ye kin call me a goat!"

"Well, if a further attempt is made to arrest us, why, we'll fight. We've work to do, tonight. The conversation I overheard at the opium joint, and the fact that Luke Lenton is not at the hotel, and has not been seen since yesterday, convinces me that he has been captured. Such being the case, it is our duty to go to his rescue, for aside from humanity's sake, it is very important that I should see the fellow. So have the horses ready, and as soon as it is dark we will visit Wah Lee's place!"

"Kinder reckon they'll make it warm for us, not?"

"Perhaps, but we must go prepared to clean out the place, providing we are attacked. Besides, after we get outside the town, we will each disguise ourselves beyond detection, you and I making up as roughs, while Johnny, in girl's attire, shall be our captive whom we take to Wah Lee, for sake-keeping. In this way we will gain his confidence, and ready access to the joint, with a fair prospect of finding out what has become of Lenton. At odd intervals, I have picked up a good bit of the Chinese language, and we can work the racket all right, if Johnny can successfully play the girl's part!"

"Jest give me ther skeerts, an' see!" spoke up Johnny. "Ef I can't play girl, you kin bet I ain't worthy of belonging to the Three Aces, nary time!"

"Well, we'll try you," Dick said, "and I'm confident you will succeed. Once we get Lenton free, we'll knock McDonald's schemes in the head, in short order!"

"You still believe Lenton is the son of Peggy Parkhurst?" queried Avalanche.

"I haven't a doubt of it. And, judging from what I have seen and learned, I believe Fred Fairfax's wife to be the lost daughter. However, we have no time to investigate that part of the case at present. The first thing is to get hold of Lenton, and recover the money I lent him."

"But, how about the dead woman?"

"Oh! she's all right, for the present. Two officers are doing guard duty, and if my suspicions are correct, McDonald will not seek to disturb the body, at present. He is a cunning rascal, and he has got so many irons in the fire that he must needs work carefully, which he will do, since he knows our calling. I shall make no positive move against him, it is likely, unless forced to, unless I have a network of overwhelming evidence coiled around him."

"So have the horses ready immediately after supper, and see that your weapons are equal to any emergency that may present itself. I have a little errand to attend to in the mean time, but will be back before it is quite dark!"

And so saying, Dick arose, put on his overcoat, and left the hotel, from whence he made his way direct to the Punch Bowl Saloon, which place he had observed a man enter, a short time before, whom he wanted to see.

The man in question, was Doctor Disco, who had superintended the burial arrangements of Peggy Parkhurst.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BELLERIN' BULL.

WHEN Deadwood Dick reached the Punch Bowl, he found the usual crowd present, the majority of whom were engaged in various games of chance.

The bar, too, was being liberally patronized, and all-in-all, Peachblow Pete was reaping a rich harvest.

On looking over the assemblage, the most of whom were bearded and roughly dressed, Dick failed to see the doctor, for whom he was in quest, and felt somewhat disappointed.

Procuring and lighting a cigar at the bar, Dick was about to take his departure when a heavy hand was clapped upon his shoulder, and he wheeled around to find himself face to face with no less a personage than Black Bud, the gambler.

There was an ugly expression on the ruffian's face, and a wicked gleam in his bloodshot eyes.

Dick quickly removed the grasp from his shoulder and stepped back a pace.

"What do you mean, sir," he demanded sternly, "by laying hands upon me?"

"I mean that you're my mutton!" was the grim retort. "I've got it in for you, young feller, and I've come around to square accounts!"

"Oh! have you? Well, what do you want?"

"I want blood!" the gambler declared, grimly. "You stuck yer cussed nose into my biz'ness last night, an' lost me my money, an' besides that, you killed my pard, Jerry Van Scooter. Tharfore, I'm goin' to have et out wi' you, or bu'st!"

"Oh! is that so? Well, if that's all, I presume you can be accommodated. I judge that you mean fight?"

"You can bet yer sweet life I do! I could 'a' killed ye when ye came into ther saloon, but, ye see, thet ain't my racket. I jest wanter hammer thet purty face o' yours, till et's beefsteak, an' then blow yer head off afterward. That's the style of a chap I am!"

"Well, my tough friend, I'd advise you, for your own good, to forego your contemplated sport, for the chances are large that you will come out at the little end of the horn!"

"Oh! I will, hey?"

"You can bet your life. I'm not the sort of a man who is accustomed to pick a quarrel, but, when I'm crowded, and find it necessary to fight, I generally get there, just the same."

"Bah! you're afraid to fight. You're a coward and a cur!"

"Oh! am I? Well, I think I can convince you that I am not!" Dick declared. "If you're spoiling for a fight, I think I can give you all you want of it. For instance, what do you think of this?" and making a quick move forward, he struck the ruffian a sledge-hammer blow full in the mouth.

As a result, Black Bud took a sudden and unceremonious drop to the floor.

In an instant there was a buzz of excitement in the saloon, for Bud had the unenviable reputation of being the toughest character within a score of miles of Bismarck.

Black Bud quickly regained his feet.

"Curse you!" he cried, "you're too much fer me wi' yer dukes. But, dare you meet me as a man, with a knife or sword?"

"I dare meet you in any way you may name, if you are still thirsting for fight!" was the composed answer. "But I'd advise you to use some sense, and not push me to fight!"

"Oh! you crawfish, do ye?"

"Nary crawfish!"

"Then I challenge you to meet me at once, with the sword, and face death like a man. I mean to kill you. This earth is not big enough to hold the both of us, and either you must kill me, or I will kill you!"

"Very well. I never was known to weaken yet, and I'll not weaken now! I want not your life, but if you insist, so be it! Lock the doors and produce the weapons, and we'll soon see who is the best man!"

"And I, Bullwhack, ther Bellerin' Bull of Bismarck, will fight the victor!" cried a loud voice, close at hand.

The speaker was a man of medium size, who had just entered in time to overhear what was passing between the young man and the gambler.

His face was covered almost to the eyes with a fiery red beard, and his hair was of the same color. He wore a pair of decidedly loud checkered pants, a red flannel shirt, knee-boots, and an old plug hat. He carried no visible weapons, and did not look at all like a dangerous person, despite his assertion to the contrary.

But Dick and Black Bud turned and surveyed the man, the latter with a snort of disgust.

"Oho! so you'll fight the victor, hey?" he roared, belligerently. "Waal, you'll hev me to tackle, then, me royal duke!"

"So much the better!" asserted the Bellerin' Bull, confidently. "If there's one man I'd rather ki-arve up more than another, you're that man! I kin jest erbout dissecck yer anatomy in a red-headed jiffy!"

"Ye kin, hey? Well, my bloomin' braggart,

"I'll be obliged to give ye a chance!" Black Bud declared. Then, turning to Deadwood Dick, he added:

"Kin I ask you to wait till I fix this chap, afore I tackle you?"

"Certainly!" Dick replied. "Anything to accommodate you! I'm thinking I shall have nothing to do, however, by the time the other fellow gets through with you!"

"Never fear!" was the reply.

The arrangements for the duel were quickly made.

The doors of the saloon were barred, and the window curtains pulled down; then, armed with two infantry swords, which the proprietor of the Punch Bowl furnished for the occasion, the two combatants stepped into the ring, which had been formed by the spectators.

Black Bud had stripped to the waist, and proved to have an elegant physique, his chest being broad and massive, while his arms were large and muscular, and looked capable of wielding a mighty blow.

Bullwhack, as he had styled himself, had removed nothing but his hat, and was decidedly inferior, both in size and physical development, to the gambler.

The choosing of seconds next followed, Black Bud selecting Peachblow Pete, and Bullwhack choosing Deadwood Dick.

"This is to be to the death!" Bud announced, as he faced his adversary.

"Just as you please!" Bullwhack averred. "It is well we understand each other at the outset. I shall show no mercy, nor shall I expect any. Are you ready?"

"You bet!" Bud declared, grimly.

"All right. Then let her go!"

Both men grasped their light swords firmly, and advanced cautiously toward each other.

The next instant there was a clash of steel that sent the sparks flying, and the battle was begun, amidst the most intense excitement.

It became apparent, from the first, that Bud had handled the sword before, for he fenced with the ease and gracefulness of a master of the art.

But, in the Bellerin' Bull of Bismarck he had an adversary whom it required all his skill to contend with, for Bullwhack took the aggressive rather than the defensive.

Clash! clash! sounded the blades, as they came together in rapid strokes; feint, parry and thrust, as the two gladiators leaped nimbly about, neither scoring a point.

Black Bud, though a man of massive chest and iron muscle, was, unfortunately, not gifted with much wind, and it soon became perceptible that he was beginning to get worried, for the active exercise caused the perspiration to stand out freely on both neck and brow.

On the other hand, Bullwhack did not sweat a hair.

As the combat continued, bets were freely made on the result, and the odds were in favor of the gambler, who finally drew first blood, by scratching his opponent's right arm.

The wound was not serious, however, for it did not interfere with the Bellerin' Bull's aggressive attack, and, as the moments passed, it became more and more apparent that Black Bud was weakening.

He seemed to realize the fact, too, and gathering all his strength, he made a desperate master lunge at his enemy, which was deftly parried, and then came the end—a thrust, and Black Bud fell to the floor.

It had indeed been the duel *a l'outrance*!

CHAPTER IX.

THREE ACES AND A JACK'S VICTORY.

THE rough crowd had all been in sympathy with Black Bud, and when the death-blow was dealt by the stranger, a howl of vengeance filled the air.

Revolvers were drawn, and one sharp report was followed by Bullwhack's fall with a wound in the breast, and he would have been trampled under foot by the infuriated crowd but for Deadwood Dick, who, raising the man in his arms, plunged from the saloon through the open doorway at the rear, no one barring his way.

Two tragedies were enough for one night, even for that bad crowd.

With his burden, Dick made his way across to the hotel, and soon had the Bellerin' Bull comfortably laid out upon a lounge in his own room.

He then had a doctor summoned, who made an examination of Bullwhack's wound, and pronounced it not necessarily fatal, though very dangerous.

With some difficulty the man was restored to consciousness, and then, after dressing the wound

and leaving a composing draught, the doctor took his departure.

When he was gone, Deadwood Dick endeavored to question the bullwhacker and learn who and what he was, for, judging by his prowess, he concluded that he was not precisely the sort of person he looked to be.

This suspicion was strengthened by the fact which Dick discovered—that the beard and hair of the bullwhacker were false.

All inquiries, however, failed to elicit anything but evasive answers, and finally, as Bullwhack expressed a desire to take a nap, Dick left him lying on the lounge and went downstairs.

After a half-hour's absence he returned to his room, and was astonished to find that the Bellerin' Bull was not there!

Nor did inquiry about the hotel furnish any clew to the wounded man's whereabouts, or a thorough search find him.

Literally, he had folded his tent and silently stolen away.

Finding that he had fled, Dick dismissed the matter from his mind, presuming that would be the last he would ever see of the fellow.

By this time it was dark, and Avalanche and Johnny Smile had brought the horses to the front of the hotel, and a few minutes later the trio were riding away toward the southern limits of the town.

They had proceeded but a couple of blocks, however, when they saw a line of men, part in civilians' garb and part in policemen's uniform, file out into the street and blockade it from side to side.

Sheriff Shields was a central figure of this formidable array, all of whom were armed with rifles.

Deadwood Dick immediately drew rein, and looked behind him, his companions following his example.

What they saw was hardly encouraging.

A line of armed men similar to that in front, was strung across the street, in the rear, and were rapidly closing up the intervening distance.

It was plain that Sheriff Shields had carefully laid his plans to capture the Three "Aces," and it looked decidedly as though he would succeed in his undertaking, for the odds against the trio were overwhelming, being fully twenty to one!

Deadwood Dick turned to Old Avalanche with rather a grim expression of countenance.

"Well, pard, this looks rather rough on rats, don't it?" he said.

"By ther great ham-bone, et do!" the Annihilator assented, puckering up his withered face dubiously. "We're between two fires, sure enough. What's ter be did? Shall ther Three Aces an' a Jack surrender?"

"Not if the court knows herself, and I ruther opine she do!" Dick declared. "If we were to surrender to these cusses, there's no telling what indignities we will be subjected to. The cur, Duncan McDonald, has put up a job against us, to get us out of his way, and the sheriff stands in with him. Our only lay-out is to run the gantlet, and take our chances. Yonder is a narrow alley, between two stores. Can we ride through it?"

Old Avalanche shook his head.

"I fear not!" he said. "Et ain't wide enough. But, look! Yonder comes the sheriff!"

It was even so.

The sheriff was advancing toward them, with a white handkerchief tied to his rifle, as a flag of truce.

"Let him come!" Dick said. "We will at least give him a chance to speak."

When he was within hailing distance, Dick covered him with his revolver, and cried:

"Halt! where you are! What do you want?"

"I want to know whether you intend to surrender peaceably, or if we must take you by main force!" the sheriff demanded.

"If you take us at all, you must do so by main force. We have done nothing to make us liable to arrest, and will not surrender!"

"You are suspicious characters, who would sneak out of town under the cover of darkness, and it is my duty to take you, no matter what the consequences. So you had best act sensible, and surrender!"

"Never!" Dick cried, firmly. "I have already proven to you who and what we are, and for any attack upon us you will be held responsible by the Government. So, you'd better change your tactics, or you'll get into graver trouble!"

"Bah! that don't scare me, for a cent. You're no detective, and I know it. That paper is a forgery. So, once and for the last time, will you surrender?"

"Never!"

Without a word, Shields turned and strode toward his posse, who had come to a halt, a score of yards away, and dropped their rifles to ground rest, pending the confab.

Deadwood Dick's quick eyes took note of this fact, and he turned to Avalanche, quickly.

"Now's our chance!" exclaimed he. "There's not a weapon covering us. Jab in yer spurs, draw your weapons, and sell your lives as dearly as possible! Forward!"

The next instant the detective prince's horse bounded forward at mad speed, directly toward the sheriff's crowd! Johnny Smile's horse quickly followed suit, while Old Avalanche on his superannuated jackass, Thunderbolt, was only a second behind.

Like a hurricane the three horsemen swept down into the midst of the line of astounded blockaders, firing right and left as they went, and creating a general panic, for the sudden onslaught took the sheriff's posse wholly by surprise, as Dick intended, while the body of men under Duncan McDonald were not yet within range to render shooting safe for their friends.

With the desperation born of imminent danger the Three Aces blazed away and almost literally mowed a pathway through the human barricade.

The sheriff's men lost no time in getting out of the way of the hoofs and whizzing bullets, and in almost less time than it takes to tell it, the Three Aces and a Jack had succeeded in their daring dash, and were borne away like the wind by their fleet steeds, followed by stray bullets, which, however, did no damage.

And the gloom of the night covered their departure!

CHAPTER X.

ENTRAPPED.

NONE of the blockading party being mounted, there was of course no use in trying to pursue the Three, and therefore they scattered to various saloons and other haunts, not a few going home to repair damages, for, although no one had been killed in the *melee*, not a few had been more or less severely wounded.

The sheriff was thoroughly disgusted with his defeat, and blamed his men for having permitted the trio to escape.

Said he:

"If over two-score of able-bodied men are not able to cope with and capture a lone three, one of whom is a boy, and the other an old moke, why I am candidly glad we were euchered!"

Duncan McDonald did not accord with these sentiments, and openly told the sheriff so, and further intimated that he, the sheriff, was a ninny of the first water.

The two, however, did not come to blows, but parted on what could hardly be called amicable terms.

When McDonald learned of the tragic death of Black Bud, at the hands of the Bellerin' Bull of Bismarck, and of the disappearance of the latter, he devoted some minutes in exhausting his vocabulary of expletives.

But, on second thought, he reconsidered.

"Perhaps it is better he is killed!" he muttered. "He knew all about my schemes, and would have insisted upon a division of the spoils in the bargain! So, everything considered, I reckon I am lucky he's out of my way, for I can utilize Pillbury in his place."

Leaving Bismarck, we will follow the Three who had so successfully broken through the ranks of the sheriff's posse.

Following the southern course of the Missouri for two miles, and then branching abruptly to the eastward, they soon reached a deserted cabin which stood in a small thicket.

The cabin was an old affair, and evidently had not been in use for some time.

The Three dismounted, and entered this cabin, when Dick lighted his dark-lantern, which he had brought along for a purpose.

The illumination thus afforded revealed the fact that the place was wholly unfurnished and deserted.

"I guess no one has been here since I was here last," Dick said, depositing the lantern upon the floor. "We must hasten to disguise ourselves, and then leave for Wah Lee's place."

The work of donning their disguises did not occupy much time.

From a closet, which seemed a part of the rough chimney, Dick drew forth a bag that contained a varied assortment of clothing, wigs, and false beards.

The first thing was to fix up Johnny Smile for the part he was to play, which was that of a girl.

Being rather short in stature, with a round, plump face, and light complexion, he was fairly

well adapted for the role, and, once attired in skirts, a rich black silk dress, blonde wig, and jaunty bonnet, he looked decidedly feminine. Shoes and stockings, and a heavy cloak, completed his disguise, and no one would have recognized him as the lesser light of the Three.

"Waal, by ther great antediluvian ham-bone, you're a daisy!" declared Old Avalanche. "Durned ef it ain't a sight fer sore eyes ter see sech a luscious lookin' gal as you."

"Sir, how dare you address me?" cried Johnny, in semi-tragic tones. "I know you not, and I demand to be released and returned to my father's house, or it will be the worse for you!"

"That's the stuff, Johnny!" cried Dick, approvingly. "You'll fill the bill. Now, then, Avalanche, square yourself, and I'll doctor you up."

Avalanche was soon thoroughly disguised, and then came Dick's turn, his disguise being very similar to that of the Annihilator, for both wore sweeping black beards, and long-haired wigs of like hue, which, together with the fact that their belts fairly bristled with weapons, gave them a decidedly brigandish appearance.

When all arrangements were completed, no time was lost in setting out for the Border, where the trio arrived, all in good time.

Before the door of Wah Lee's establishment, they halted and dismounted.

Then, each grasping Johnny by the wrist, Dick and the Annihilator bolted into the opium-joint.

The place was lacking, somewhat, of its usual nocturnal audience, there being but a few of the usual rough *habitués* engaged in games, and a still smaller number lounging about the bar, waiting for some one to come in and stand treat.

Wah Lee and another Chinaman were seated at a table near the door engaged in conversation.

Leaving Johnny in charge of Avalanche, Deadwood Dick advanced to the table.

"Is this Wah Lee's place?" he demanded, gruffly.

"It is!" Lee replied, in good English. "What you want?"

For answer, Dick handed the Celestial a note covered with Chinese hieroglyphics. In English the writing had the following interpretation:

"TO WAH LEE, BISMARCK, D. T.:—

"The bearer is Red Roger, one of the Rudolph brothers. Wants protection for captive. He is to be trusted implicitly on my account. Big money in it. Will visit you in a few days.

"Hi Foo Lung,
"Yankton."

Wah Lee read the message twice, and then looked up, and surveyed Dick, curiously.

"When leave Yankton?" he inquired.

"Five days ago. Delayed by storm," Dick replied, still gruffly.

"Where Foo Lung?" was the next query.

But for a fairly intimate knowledge of the capital of Dakota, Dick would have been cornered by this question, but it so happened that he had been in Yankton, and had had occasion to have some laundry-work done at the establishment of a nabob "Washee-washee" named Hi Foo Lung. As he lost a part of his linen by the transaction, he always held the *locale* in memory. Hence, he found ready answer to Wah Lee's query.

"Hi Foo Lung keeps a laundry on Rose street!" he said promptly.

Wah Lee nodded, evidently satisfied.

"Right!" he declared. "Who is girl?"

"The daughter of a rich man. We are going to hold her for a big ransom," Dick replied. "You furnish a good place to keep her, and you will be well paid as soon as we make our stake."

Wah Lee was the last man to lose a chance to make "a big stake," and nodding his approval, he arose.

"Come!" he said. "Bring girl!"

He then led the way toward the rear of the gambling-room, and opened a door leading into one of the side apartments.

Deadwood Dick and Avalanche followed, pulling Johnny Smile along between them.

Johnny struggled, with apparent desperation, and made beseeching protestations, but all to no avail, for he was hurried into the side-room, and the door was closed, shutting off all sound from the larger apartment.

The Chinaman then lit a lantern, after which he raised a trap-door, in the floor, and the quartet descended into a small cellar, whose bottom was floored, the same as the room above.

Here another trap-door was lifted, and they descended into a sub-cellar, both deeper and

larger than the first, the walls and bottom being of limestone.

At one side of this cellar, which was only reached by descending a ladder, were grated iron doors which guarded the entrance to dungeons beyond.

Producing a bunch of keys, Wah Lee unlocked and threw open one of the doors, at the same time motioning the pseudo "Rudolph brothers" to conduct their captive within.

Not suspicious of treachery, the "brothers" obeyed, and then—

The door clanged shut behind them, the key turned in the lock, the light went out, leaving all in Stygian darkness.

"Trapped!" cried Dick.

In answer, there came a mocking laugh, and the imprisoned detectives soon heard a slam of the trap-door overhead.

For a moment there was silence in the dungeon; then Old Avalanche broke forth.

"Yas! by ther great ham-bone, yer right. We're caged as pritty as a passel of skunks. We orter go soak our heads!"

"The old man's right!" put in Johnny Smile, in a tone of disgust. "Ef some one'll kick me fer an eejot. I'm hanged if I won't stand treat!"

"Here, too!" assented Deadwood Dick, grimly.

"I feel like kicking myself. That infernal pig-tailed rascal took matters in such a matter-of-fact manner that he did not even arouse a suspicion in my mind that he contemplated mischief. Confound his ugly picture! If I ever get my hands on him, there will be one dead Chinaman around these parts, you bet! Who has got a match?"

"I've got a hull box of 'em!" responded Johnny.

"All right, then. Strike a light, and let's see what sort of a place we're in, anyhow!"

Johnny obeyed, and, by the light afforded by the match, they found that they were in a dungeon some seven feet square, and that the grated door was too strong an affair to think of easily breaking open.

The apartment contained but one thing, and that proved to be a piece of candle stuck in a potato candlestick—left there by some visitor from above.

Evidently the Three were not the only prisoners the place had held.

This candle was immediately lit, and so, for the time being, the detectives were enabled to study each other's expressions of countenance, which were decidedly gloomy.

"Well, I'll be doggoned if I ain't mad enuff ter shute myself!" Avalanche declared, dubiously, as he seated himself on the floor. "I hev allus thort heretofore thet three aces were a purty sure winnin' han', but I'll be beat ter death wi' corrugated ham-bones ef I weren't mistaken!"

"Pugh! what's the use of cryin' over spilt milk, Snowslide!" queried Johnny, striking an attitude.

"You're young, an' I'm girlish. But we shouldn't be churlish. Because of a Chinaman's trick; Just wait 'til we're out, And our time comes to shout. Oh! but *won't* we make Wah Lee feel sick?"

"Very clever!" said Deadwood Dick, "but entirely out of place. Poetry, under the present circumstances, is not excusable. The thing to be considered is, how are we to get out of here?"

"That's easy!" declared Johnny, who, boy-like, had taken out his pocket-knife, and begun carving his initials in the soft limestone of which the walls of the cell were composed. "This ere rock's as soft as chalk, and if we can't get out any other way, why we kin dig out!"

Dick drew his hunting-knife, and in a moment confirmed Johnny's statement.

"You're right!" he said. "By our united efforts, if we are not disturbed, we can, in a short time dig out. To do so successfully it must be done before the light expires. So let's set to work at once!"

And they did.

With drawn knives, they attacked the chalk-like wall, at one side of the doorway, and as it chipped off easily, they made rapid progress.

But, before they could cut their way through, they were destined to encounter a serious interruption, as it first appeared, but what afterward proved to be an advantageous one.

The interruption first came in the form of approaching footsteps.

Presuming that it was Wah Lee returning, Dick immediately ordered a suspension of work, and the Three listened with bated breath.

Nearer and nearer approached the footsteps, until they paused directly in front of the door.

Then the prisoners perceived that instead of Wah Lee, the man on the outside was no less a personage than Big Bullwhack, the Bellerin' Bull of Bismarck!

"Hello!" Dick cried, in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Reconnoitering!" was the reply.

"But, I thought you were badly hurt!"

Bullwhack chuckled.

"If I'd been hurt very much I'd not be here to your rescue."

"How did you know where we were?"

"I came to Wah Lee's place, in quest of a man whom I believe to be my deadly enemy. You know him as well as I—Duncan McDonald!"

"Ah! Then I infer that you were in the joint when we entered?"

"I was, and recognizing you, I knew you war trapped, when Wah Lee returned, without you. Knowing you were my friend, I watched my chance, came down here, unbeknown to any one, and here I am. If I can be of any use to you I am at your service!"

"Well, if you can open this door, you can certainly be of considerable use to us!" Dick replied.

"But, you may shoot me, tho,' if you ain't a puzzle. That you are disguised, I know full well; but, who you really are, I don't understand!"

"Probably not. But you may know, all in good time. As for this door, I reckon it will be a hard job to open it, as I have no keys, nor have I any means of prying it open."

"Then we might as well keep on digging out," Dick said. "You stand guard near the ladder, and if any one comes down, knock 'em on the head."

And so it was arranged.

Big Bullwhack retired to the foot of the ladder, and Dick, Avalanche and Johnny resumed operations with their knives, with a will.

In ten minutes' time they had cut a hole through the wall, of sufficient size to allow their easy escape from the cell.

By the time they got on the outside, the candle was pretty nearly consumed.

The quartet held a hasty consultation, and decided to make an examination of the other cells, before leaving the sub-cellar.

This was quickly done, but they were found to be unoccupied.

Dick was considerably disappointed, for he had felt sure that he would find Luke Lenton imprisoned in one of the vaults.

"I thought sure I'd find Lenton!" he said, addressing Avalanche. "Lenton has certainly disappeared from the hotel where he was stopping, and yet, his baggage is left behind at the hotel. Accordingly, as McDonald arranged with Black Bud to have Lenton kidnapped, it stands to reason that the job has been done. So we must not leave this place until we find Lenton."

"Who is Lenton?" queried Bullwhack.

There was something peculiar in the tone of the fellow's voice, that caused Dick to give the man a sharp glance.

"Why do you ask?" he demanded.

"Oh! jest out o' curiosity."

"Do you know Lenton?"

"Not intimately. He saved my life, not long ago, and I know that he is not a prisoner."

"Where is he, then?"

"That I do not choose to tell. He did me a lasting favor, and in repayment, requested that I keep his immediate whereabouts a secret."

"Indeed! Perhaps you are Lenton."

"Oh! no. If you ever saw him, it will be easy for you to remember that he was at least a head taller than I."

Dick did remember, and eyed the man rather suspiciously.

"Maybe you're right," he conceded, "but I'll be blown if I don't find out who you are!"

As he spoke, the detective prince reached quickly forward, and seized the Bellerin' Bull by the false beard.

A jerk detached the disguise, and the pallid countenance of Fred Fairfax was revealed in the flickering light of the candle!

CHAPTER XI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE WIND-UP.

To say that Deadwood Dick was surprised, would be "drawing it mild."

As for Fairfax himself, he at first flushed red with anger, but immediately his expression changed to a broad grin.

"Well, by all that's wonderful! You're the last person I expected to see!" Dick declared.

"I thought you were cremated in the grocery store fire?"

"That is what everybody thinks, and I want them to keep on thinking so, for awhile, at least, you see. Hence, the reason for my disguise of Bullwhack."

"Why do you wish to suppress the facts of the case?" Dick inquired, curiously.

"For the simple reason that a rascal expects to realize by my death, and I don't want to make myself known until I get him in my power so I can squelch him."

"You refer to Duncan McDonald?"

"Yes. You seem to know him."

"I know very little good of him. You are right in supposing he expects to benefit by your death. I know that, full well."

"How?"

"From the little circumstance that I was present in the insurance office when your will was signed, and the insurance made upon your life!"

"If that is the case, you, then, were the Clay Coleman of that occasion, who witnessed my signature."

"Just so. I had orders to arrest Pillbury for a forgery formerly committed in Yankton; but, as I plainly saw that he and the fellow McDonald were putting up a job on you, I made up my mind to forego the arrest, until I could further investigate."

"I see. Well, I suspected this treachery, and when a decoy notice was sent to my wife, to go to La Force's, I made no particular objections to her going, as I surmised it was a scheme to get her away, so an attack could be made on me. So I held my own counsel, and remained on the alert, and when I smelled chloroform entering my room, I lay perfectly still, knowing that, as my window was down from the top, the drug would have no particular effect on me, if I slept."

"By and by, the chloroform ceased to penetrate my room, the door opened, and an associate of McDonald's, Black Bud, looked in. Appearing satisfied that I was under the influence of the drug he closed the door, and went downstairs. I immediately escaped by the side stairway, and made myself scarce."

"Concluding to baffle the conspirators, and have revenge upon them, I adopted this disguise, and remain *incognito*. And now, as I have learned you are a detective, and as you are a little better acquainted, I suggest that we work together for the conviction of this rascal, McDonald."

"Agreed!" Dick cried, thrusting out his hand.

"I am already in possession of considerable data concerning him; for his is not a single scheme against you, but a scheme of double—ay! treble magnitude, by which he expects to come into three large sums of money."

"Firstly, he expects to get ten thousand dollars out of the insurance on your life, and a power over your wife. Secondly, a woman recently died, leaving a fortune to her children, and in papers she left behind, she expresses the belief that her husband, who died before her, left a fortune, similarly disposed. From what I have gleaned, I am satisfied that this McDonald is in possession of all this data, and is scheming to corral all the boodle. Just how he expects to do it, I am not prepared to state at present; but if you are ready to join issues in the matter, I presume we can work the case to a satisfactory conclusion."

"Then, that settles it. Henceforth we are detective pals, until we have run Duncan McDonald to earth!"

"Hooray! By ther great ham-bone that phosphatized old Joner, that's what I say! We're four on us now, an' ef we can't make ther fur fly, why ye kin call me a durned superannuated snappin'-turtle! Why, in honor uv ther event, Fairfacts, I'll drop out my jackass, Thunderbolt, from ther partnership o' ther Three Aces and a Jack, an' you kin hev his persish!"

"Thanks!" smiled Fred, while the others laughed.

"Ef I were allowed to sling in a suggestion," spoke up Johnny Smile, "I should say et would be appropriate to make his nibs Jack No. 2; then there'd be Three Aces and Two Jacks, which is a full hand, an' ginerally scoops the pot!"

"You're right," Deadwood Dick assented, "and so we'll christen Fairfax Jack of Clubs. But now let's make a break to get out of here, without further delay."

The light of the candle had almost entirely expired, and it was therefore necessary for them to make haste.

Dick first ascended the ladder, and the others followed; then the trap was closed down.

The next thing done was to listen.

Overhead there were sounds of revelry, which proved that the place was still patronized by its usual *habitués*.

"Well, boys, I allow we shall have to make a break for liberty, and shoot as we go!" Dick announced, grimly.

"Not if we can get into the small room above without difficulty," replied Fairfax, "for there is a window in that room, I noticed, which opens out of doors."

"Good! Then we're all right."

They experienced no difficulty in reaching the room above, and, as noiseless as cats, made their escape from the building.

They failed, however, to find their horses, and so re-entered Bismarck on foot.

Before doing so, however, they visited the lone cabin, where the Three had donned their disguises, and here the quartette made another and entire change, coming forth as rough miners, equipped with mining implements, and proceeding to a moderate-priced tavern in Bismarck, they secured a comfortable room, with four beds, on the upper floor.

Here another consultation was held.

"I have been thinking," remarked Fairfax, "while on the way here, of your associating the names of Luke Lenton and Duncan McDonald, in connection with the suspicion that the former had been kidnapped by the authority of the latter. Does this supposed scheme of McDonald's have any connection with his plot against me?"

"I am not certain. If you will listen I will tell you the story I heard from Peggy Parkhurst, and you can form your own opinion."

"All right. Go ahead."

Accordingly, Dick narrated, in detail, the story of the deceased recluse, adding in conclusion:

"After Peggy Parkhurst's burial, I concluded to open her papers, in order to gain information that I was not able to get from any other source. As it happened, I was successful. One paper stated that Peggy Parkhurst believed her former husband, Butler Bates, had left behind a large fortune, and his son, Burton, would be sent out in search of his sister. This paper also stated that Duncan McDonald, who was a relative of the deceased woman, had for years been scheming to get hold of her fortune, and it was her belief that he also knew the whereabouts of the Bates children, and kept all tidings of them from her, albeit she had paid him to obtain for her all possible information of them."

"On coming into possession of these facts, I at once came to the conclusion that, since McDonald had arranged to leave Luke Lenton entrapped, it rather stood to reason there was a possibility that Lenton really was Burton Bates, whom he wanted out of his way, until he could succeed in his schemes!"

"Not a bad inference, perhaps," Fairfax said, thoughtfully. "But, what would Burton Bates be doing out in this country?"

"Here in search of his sister, no doubt. If my solution of McDonald's villainy is anything like correct, why, chances are large that he has some intimate knowledge of the whereabouts of Burton's sister, the adopted parents of the girl having settled somewhere in the Far West."

"Do you know what the name of these people were?"

"Fulton, I believe."

"Fulton?"

"Yes."

"Indeed! And, what was the Bates girl's first name?"

"Frances."

Fred Fairfax jumped to his feet, excitedly.

"Frances?" he ejaculated. "Then, by heaven, I have the very person you are looking for! My wife's name is Frances, or, Fanny, for short, and before she married me, she was the adopted daughter of a family named Fulton, who lived in Yankton, but who are now dead. After their death, Fanny came to Bismarck in search of work, and I met and married her."

"Only a couple of hours before the grocery store fire, Fanny and I were talking over matters in regard to her antecedents, and she said she had never been able to learn aught of her early life, except that her true name was Bates. This seems to prove, conclusively, then, that she is the lost heiress!"

"By Jove, you're right! It is lucky we have met, for now we can easily baffle McDonald's villainous schemes, where, had you been cremated, matters would have been more difficult to unravel. Have you seen your wife since the fire?"

"No, but I hear she is very ill!"

"Yes. I have employed Doctor Disco to attend to her, and as he says she will undoubtedly recover all right, it will perhaps be best that you remain *incognito* for a while. I will personally communicate to her that you are alive, and will visit her when she is fully recovered."

"Good idea!" Fred assented.

"And now," continued Dick, "this room will be our future headquarters, and when not employed, we will meet here, and compare notes. Your work, Fairfax, will be to wait upon Luke Lenton, and tell him that I want to see him at the earliest opportunity, as I have valuable news for him, concerning his sister. When you spring this information on him, you can easily tell whether or not he is Burton Bates."

"In the mean time, as I have some work in another direction, you, Avalanche and Johnny, can occupy yourselves in shadowing Duncan McDonald, and listening, so far as possible, to what he may have to say to others. If all works well, we'll have the schemer behind the bars before another week passes!"

CHAPTER XII.

DICK AND FANNY.

DICK then went down-stairs, for, though it was after midnight, the hotel was not yet closed for the night.

Somewhat to his surprise, Dick found Doctor Disco in the office, looking over the register. He did not venture to speak to the man of medicine, until he was about to leave the hotel; then Dick touched him on the shoulder, saying:

"Were you looking for any one in particular, sir?"

Disco turned with a start, for he was a man who rarely forgot a voice, and at once recognized that of Deadwood Dick.

"Yes, my friend, I have been searching at every hotel for you, for I presumed you would return to town under an assumed name, and in disguise. What name are you registered under here?"

"John, James, Joseph and Jerry Gray, miners, from Bowie."

"That's good! You were mighty lucky to escape the attack made upon you."

"Yes, I don't know but I was. How is Mrs. Fairfax?"

"I left her a couple of hours ago, and she was feeling better, but is very sad. What I wanted to see you for most particularly, was to get further directions in regard to this fellow, McDonald. He called to see Mrs. Fairfax, during the evening, on, as he said, important business. I advised her to send down word that she could not see him until morning, when he might call, and she did so. I preferred to let you know, before such an interview took place."

"Quite right!" Dick said, thoughtfully. "I want to arrange matters so I can overhear the interview. I suppose you told Mrs. Fairfax what I told you to."

"Yes, and she expressed much joy to know that you were her friend, and desired to see you at your earliest convenience."

"Very well. I will call upon her. Is she in need of anything in particular that is not already at her command?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"Very likely I will call the first thing," Dick said, and soon after he and the doctor parted.

Quite early the next morning Dick paid a visit to the La Forces' home, and, on making himself known, was conducted into the presence of Mrs. Fairfax, whom he found bolstered up in an easy chair.

She was very pale, and had evidently undergone great mental suffering; but she greeted him with a pleasant smile, and evidently was glad he had called.

"After Doctor Disco told me about you, and that you were a detective working out the mystery of the fire, I have been anxious to see you," she said. "Despite the fact that they say my poor husband was consumed by the flames, I cannot bring myself to believe it. If he had been burned up, it seems to me that some trace of his remains would have been found!"

"It would seem so, Mrs. Fairfax, but no remains have been found, and that is not at all surprising to me."

"Indeed? Why not?"

"From the fact that your husband was not consumed in the flames at all!"

"What! Do you mean to tell me that Fred is really alive, sir?" and Fanny sprang to her feet, excitedly.

"Yes, Mrs. Fairfax, I am happy to be able to inform you that your husband is as live and well as I am myself. Pray do not get excited, however, as you are not strong enough to stand it!"

"Oh! I can stand anything, if my dear husband is really alive!" Fanny declared, joyously. "But tell me, sir, if he is alive, why don't he come to me? I can't understand that!"

"The principal reason for his not coming is because I counseled him not to do so. He is in disguise, and together we are working up evidence against your enemy that will eventually cast him into prison, where he belongs."

"My enemy? Pray, whom do you mean?"

"His name is Duncan McDonald."

"Ah! But how should he be my enemy? I never did him an injury."

"That matters not. McDonald is a diabolical villain. Two weeks before the fire, he induced your husband to make his will, and also get his life insured for ten thousand dollars. In doing this, it was a part of McDonald's plan to get you into his power, and to get possession of the insurance money. In order to carry out the latter scheme, he made the attempt to cremate your husband, after decoying you to this house!"

Fanny held up her hands in horror.

"The monster!" she gasped. "Then to think he had the audacity to seek an interview with me, last night!"

"Oh! that's only a part of his scheming. He will call this morning, and doubtless seek to induce you in one way or another to marry him. You must receive him, and refuse his proposals, in a hesitating way. But, as his argument grows stronger, you must appear to deliberate, and, finally to yield to his persuasions, and set the date of the wedding for day-after-to-morrow-night."

"What! I promise to marry that man, and my own dear husband living?" cried Fanny, indignantly. "Why, what do you mean, sir?"

Dick laughed.

"I mean, ma'am, to have you aid us in coraling the scoundrel. Our plan is to weave the web of evidence so strong about him, that, just as he is about to marry you we can close in on him and make his defeat doubly sure."

"Ah, yes, I now understand. If I can aid you and Frank, of course I will willingly do as you direct. But, I would dearly love to see my husband."

"Have everything ready and be prepared to marry Duncan McDonald at eight o'clock, day-after-to-morrow-night, and you will be restored not only to your husband, but in all probability to your brother!"

"To my brother! Why, how strangely you speak. I have no brother!"

"No? Well, we shall see. I am pretty well satisfied that you have, and that I can put my hands on the right person. Let me ask, what was your name before you were married, Mrs. Fairfax?"

"Frances Fulton, sir."

"Were the Fultons your own parents?"

"No, sir; I was their adopted daughter."

"Do you know who your own parents really were?"

"No, sir—that is, the Fultons would never tell me more than that my father's name was Bates."

"Ah! then I am on the right trail. You are the long-lost daughter of the late Butler Bates, of Boston, and of his discarded wife, now dead, who has been known, here in Bismarck, as Peggy Parkhurst. Consequently, you are part heiress to what money the recluse left behind her."

"But, say nothing of this interview to McDonald, when he comes, nor mention aught I have told you; and if the rascal tells you a similar story, feign ignorance of having heard it before."

"Very well, sir; I will do as you wish."

"Now, as it is near time for McDonald to put in an appearance, and as I want to overhear what he has to say, in order to form counter-plans, is there anywhere I can secrete myself, near at hand?"

"I don't know of any place, unless you get in under the bed!" Fanny laughed.

"Capital place!" Dick decided, "only I hope your coming suitor will not make a protracted stay!"

He had only fairly got himself ensconced in his hiding-place when the ringing of the door-bell announced the arrival of Duncan McDonald.

CHAPTER XIII.

MCDONALD'S WOOING.

A SERVANT soon brought McDonald's card up, and directly afterward the arch-schemer appeared before Mrs. Fairfax, and became seated.

He was elaborately dressed, and had the appearance of a fashionable society man of wealth and station.

Many a woman might have become enamored of him, but Fanny Fairfax had an intense dislike for the man.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" Fanny asked, coldly.

"Ahem! Well, yes, Mrs. Fairfax," the visitor replied, removing his gloves. "I have some little business to transact, and, in addition, I wished to tender my sincerest sympathy for you in your bereavement. It must have been a sad blow to you, to lose your good husband, in so shocking a manner."

"Yes," Fanny replied, reservedly. "What is the nature of your business with me, sir?"

"Well, it's really somewhat of a complicated matter, you know, but for your sake I am hopeful I shall be able to straighten things out. You see, it's this way: For some time past I have been cognizant of your husband's failing health, and saw that at the furthest, he was not long for this world. I knew that you were both poor, and that should he die, you would be left at the mercy of an un pitying world."

"Owing to the tender feelings I have entertained for you since the time we were better known to each other than of late, my feelings have revolted at the thought you should be left penniless, and the matter preyed so on my mind that meeting your husband, a few days before the fire, I had a talk with him, and induced him to have his life insured. After due consideration, he consented, and we went together and had the matter fixed up. His life was insured for ten thousand dollars. He then made his will, and made me executor of it. It was drawn in such a way that, in event of his death, the insurance money should be paid direct to me, and I should hold it in trust for you, until you were comfortably married again, when I should make it over to you."

"Indeed! A very strange will, I should say."

"Yes, rather. But that ain't the worst of it. The money is here in Bismarck, and so is one of the directors of the insurance company, who is inclined to dispute the validity of the contract and to refuse to pay over the money, until I procure ten reputable citizens' vouchers, to bond me as custodian of the money."

"Of course this is not one of the easiest things to do, but I think, for your sake, I can arrange matters. But, right here arises the question: Whom are you going to marry? Have you any one in view?"

"Certainly not."

"I presumed not. But in order to get the insurance money, you will have to select and marry some one within a day or two, or the director will return East, and take the money with him."

"Then there is another matter, Mrs. Fairfax, I wish to call your attention to, which is concerning the will of your mother, Peggy Parkhurst, whose intimate friend and adviser I have been for years. The will gives to you and your brother, Burton Bates, each the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, with the following provisions: In case Frances Bates is dead, the money all goes to Burton to do with as he elects. If Burton is dead, the fortune goes to Frances, in case she first weds the man of her mother's selection—that is, half goes to Frances and half to her husband. In case Frances refuses to marry the man of her mother's selection, the entire fortune goes toward establishing a college in Bismarck. And it so happens that I have also been appointed by the dead woman to take sole charge of the disposal of this fortune. Really, now, am I not placed in a peculiar position?"

And the arch-schemer laughed, with apparent heartiness. It was a laugh, though, Fanny did not like. It was the laugh of ill-concealed triumph.

"Yes, I should say you were placed in a strange position, but not so much so as myself," Fanny replied; "nay, not half so much so as myself. Why, it seems as if I am to be remarried, whether I will or not. But they'll get disappointed, for now that my husband is dead, I wouldn't marry the best man in the world!"

"In that case, Mrs. Fairfax, you will be the loser of a nice sum, for I may as well tell you that your brother died in St. Paul, while in search of you, some six months ago. It really seems too bad to see you literally throw away a fortune, when it would give you comfort for the remainder of your life."

"No doubt you are right; but the fact is, that, marrying a man I could not respect, much less love, would be a misery no amount of money could atone for."

"Well, of course you are the best judge of your own feelings," McDonald said, with apparent carelessness. "But I think I could

suggest a way which would not be objectionable."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you know, Mrs. Fairfax, that I have loved you dearly, and even though you rejected me when I asked you to be mine, it did not deaden my affection for you, but made it burn all the fiercer. However, like a man of honor, I have never since ventured to approach you on the subject of love until now, when I find myself situated where our interests are mutual. Marry me, and not only will I make you a loving and devoted husband, but I will secure for you all that belongs to you."

"How can you do this? Where do you get so much power?"

"Well, by marrying me, you get the insurance, for, once you are my wife, I can have the money turned over to you without the necessity of getting bondsmen. By marrying me, you will also become eligible to one-half of the Peggy Parkhurst fortune."

"How so?"

"From the fact that I am the party your mother selected for you to marry!"

"Indeed?"

"Just so. You seem surprised; but when you come to consider that I was always a faithful friend to your mother, you can scarcely wonder at her choice."

"Supposing I refuse to marry you?" Fanny asked, thoughtfully.

"Well, in that case, there is but one line of duty for me to pursue. I shall of course not feel like going to the expense and trouble of securing bondsmen, and the insurance director will refuse to give up the money. As regards the other case, I shall feel in duty bound to carry out the directions of the will to the letter, which will be to devote the entire estate to the erection of a college. So it seems to me, Mrs. Fairfax, it seems very strange to me, that you will allow the fortune to slip away from you just on account of prejudice!"

"I have not said I was going to do so, yet!" Fanny replied, promptly. "How long will you give me to consider?"

"I must have my answer before I leave here to-night!"

"Supposing I do marry you, how am I to be certain of receiving the money?"

"My word is sufficient. The wills give the money to you, and I would have to deal fairly with you. And why should I not?"

"Well, I—I—; when must this marriage take place?"

"At once!"

"That will be impossible. I cannot possibly be ready for the ceremony, before day after to-morrow night, at eight o'clock!"

"Well, that must do I suppose. As soon as the words are spoken, that make us man and wife, I will place half of your mother's fortune in your hands. The insurance matter can be closed up, soon afterward. Have I your promise that you will marry me, at the time you have named?"

"Yes, I will then be ready for the ceremony."

"Thank you! thank you! Your words have brought to me the greatest happiness of my hitherto lonely life. Your good sense will also bring us the comfort resulting from wealth, as we go down through life together."

"But, I will not tire you further, now, but leave you to yourself, until the eventful hour of our nuptials arrives, when I shall expect to find you in readiness. In the mean time, with every breath I shall bless you for the happiness you have given me!"

He caught her hand in his, kissed it, and then, in a very knightly way, bowed himself out of the room.

Villain though he was, he showed some consideration in not wishing to kiss the lips of the woman whom he flattered himself he had made his dupe.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAST INTO THE MISSOURI.

As soon as Duncan McDonald had taken his departure, Deadwood Dick crawled from under the bed, and straightened out his cramped limbs.

"By Jinks! I'm glad that scoundrel's gone!" he declared, with a grimace, "for my limbs are already twisted into as many shapes as a camel's. By the way, Mrs. Fairfax, allow me to congratulate you, for you played your part to my satisfaction, and at the same time satisfied McDonald."

"It will be easy work now to nab him. So all you will have to do is to continue to play

your role until the wedding night, when we will be on the spot to take a hand in the game."

Fanny promised to do her share, and Dick left the house, returning to the hotel, satisfied that everything was working as it should work.

At the hotel he found only Fred Fairfax in the council-chamber, and made known to him, in substance, what had recently happened at the La Force mansion.

"Confound the infernal rascal!" Fred indignantly exclaimed. "He must not run across my path, for I could not keep my hands off of him."

"No; do nothing of the kind," Dick replied. "We can well bide our time for the victory that will be ours. Have you found Luke Lenton yet?"

"No, although I have been in search of him. The last I saw of him, he had engaged board at a private house, and said that for certain reasons he would have to keep quiet for awhile. I did not know what he meant, but formed an impression that he had got into trouble of some sort. When I went to the house to-day, I was told that nothing had been seen of him since he engaged board."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday, about the time of your encounter with the sheriff and his men."

"Did you find out if his trunk was at the hotel where he first stopped?"

"Yes. It is there, and no one has been to claim it."

"Strange! I hardly believe the fellow has left town, nor can I see what he is keeping himself so shady for, except it be to avoid returning the money he borrowed of me at Wah Lee's. Well, keep a sharp lookout, and perhaps you'll find him. By the way, where are Old Avalanche and Johnny?"

"I haven't seen them since early this morning. Presume they're off on the trail of McDonald."

And Fred was right. The missing two were after McDonald, and with a vengeance, too.

But let's make a slight retrogression, and pick up the trail where we left off.

When McDonald left the La Force mansion, his face wore an expression of diabolical triumph, while his eyes glittered evilly.

"By the gods! I'm in luck," he muttered, as he strode along. "I had no idea matters would shape around so easily in my favor. Where I expected to use threats to bring the woman to time, the allurements of the prospective fortune did the work for me. Prospective! Ha! ha! that's a good word for it. Once she is mine there'll be a mighty slim prospect of her getting much of the money. Verily, things are working nicely. If I can keep those accursed detectives off the track, for a time, I'll have fought the worst part of the battle, after my meeting with Burton Bates."

He glanced at his watch, and hurried on toward the southern outskirts of the town.

A brisk walk of half an hour brought him to a bluff overlooking the angry waters of the mad Missouri.

Here he paused and waited.

In ten minutes' time he was joined by no less a personage than Luke Lenton, whose face wore an eager, expectant expression, as he approached the arch-schemer.

"Are you Duncan McDonald?" Lenton demanded, thrusting out his hand.

"I am Duncan McDonald," was the haughty response, without an offer to take the proffered hand. "Who are you?"

"I am Burton Bates, whom you sent for to come here, from Boston, sir, you claiming to be able to show me my long-lost sister."

McDonald laughed grimly.

"So you're Butler Bates's son, eh?" he said, drawlingly.

"I am, sir."

"Yes, you look considerably as he did, when I saw him last. So the old man's dead, eh?"

"Yes."

"S'pose he must have left quite a fortune behind, eh?"

"Well, yes, he left a nice sum of money to be divided between me and my sister, in case I was ever able to find her."

"D'ye ever expect to find her?"

"Certainly. Why not? Didn't you write me that if I came here to Bismarck, you would restore my sister to me?"

"Well, yes, I did, but didn't suppose you were fool enough to believe it. The truth is, your sister went up the flume a year ago. She was a tough character, and went the way all such critters go. Haw! haw! haw!" and the wretch laughed hoarsely, causing the listener to grow pale with horror.

"Villain! infamous wretch!" Lenton cried, taking a step nearer the scoundrel; "dare you—"

Lenton, otherwise Burton Bates, did not get an opportunity to finish the sentence, for he received a blow between the eyes that felled him senseless to the ground.

McDonald glared down at him a moment, savagely.

"No! I'll not stain my hands with his blood!" he muttered. "The river will do the work, quite as well, and leave no tell-tale traces. Yes! the river it shall be!" and without further deliberation, he raised the senseless man in his arms, bore him to the edge of the bluff, which descended almost perpendicularly into the now swollen and swift-running river.

Pausing and giving the body a swing, he heaved Lenton off into blank space. He struck the waters with a loud splash. Turning abruptly, Duncan McDonald fled from the spot as though pursued by a legion of avengers.

But, the crime had by no means been unwitnessed. There was a thicket of bushes on the bluff, near at hand, and crouching in this covert, the two sleuths, Old Avalanche and Johnny Smile, had witnessed and overheard all that had transpired.

No sooner had McDonald started on a swift run back toward Bismarck, than Avalanche clutched Johnny by the arm, excitedly.

"Quick! boyce," he cried. "After the skunk! dog him like a bloodhound, and don't lose sight of him, until ye find out ef he's up to any new deviltry!"

"But, the feller in the river—?"

"Never mind. I'll rescue him, if sech a thing is possible! Git, now!"

And Johnny did "git," without delay.

He had no difficulty in following his game, either, for Duncan McDonald never once looked back. He went direct to the office of Professor Lucius Pillbury, and found that dilapidated confederate in crime in his room.

Adjoining this room was another used for the storage of firewood, and Johnny Smile was soon snugly stowed away in this place.

There was a crack in the board partition between the two rooms, and Johnny at once affixed his ear to this, about as firmly as though it was glued there.

"Well, how is things?" Pillbury demanded, opening the conversation.

"Excellent!" the schemer replied. "Couldn't be better. I've just got rid of Burton Bates, so he won't be in the way, and, better than all, Fanny Fairfax has consented to marry me, two nights hence!"

Pillbury whistled.

"You don't say so!"

"But, I do!"

"Then, all's right."

"Yes. When do you expect the money on the policy?"

"Within a week's time. The company usually settles very promptly."

"I hope they will, in this instance, as I want my share of the divy, and then I am going to skip."

"Where to?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Once I'm heeled, I'll vamoose, for it wouldn't be a healthy climate around here for a man of my fragile constitution, if the fraud were to leak out."

"No, I presume not. I'm not of the opinion I shall tarry long, once I get my clutches on the money."

"You'd better not try to grab it all, and skip, mind you!"

"Oh! I'll deal all square with you."

"Of course you will! You'll have to. Indeed, you will!"

"Why so?"

"Because, if you'd play me for a monkey, I'd hev you locked up!" and McDonald laughed viciously.

"You needn't go to that trouble. I'm square as a die. There's only one more job to do, and then I shall retire from the compound villainy business, and adopt some more lucrative profession."

"What job do you refer to?"

"Getting hold of Peggy Parkhurst's money."

"Ah! have you found it?"

"No; but I am satisfied the old fool had it buried with her."

"Why so?"

"Because two detectives are watching her grave constantly—one by day and one by night. If there wasn't something more to guard than a cold corpse, they wouldn't be there."

"Guess you're right."

"I know I'm right."

"Are you going to investigate, to make certain?"

"You can bet I am!"

"But, how about the guards?"

"We'll have to sneak up behind, and sand-bag 'em, then bind and gag 'em, and put them away, until we can open the grave."

"Who do you mean by we?"

"You and I."

"Do I share in the boodle?"

"By no means."

"Then, you must get some one else."

"That is impossible. You are the only one I can trust!"

"Then, you must pay for the accommodation of having some one to trust!"

"How much will you take to help me through with the job?"

"Half the boodle!"

"Nonsense. I'll give you a thousand dollars, and no more!"

"Well! I'll take it. When is the job to be done?"

"To-night. Be at the cemetery gate, at one o'clock, well armed, and it won't take long to do the job."

"All right. I'll be there," and McDonald took his departure.

CHAPTER XV.

A BAFFLED GHOUL.

JOHNNY SMILE lost no time in hastening to the headquarters of the detectives, and communicating to Deadwood Dick the particulars of the occurrence on the river bluff, and what he had learned at the interview between McDonald and Pillbury.

While they were conversing, Avalanche entered, accompanied by Luke Lenton, whom he had rescued from the river.

Both were wet and cold, and glad to avail themselves of the cosy fire that burned in the detectives' apartment.

After they had dried their garments, a long conversation took place.

Upon being thoroughly questioned Lenton admitted that he was Burton Bates, and that he had come West in search of his sister, the reason for his attempting the journey being that he had received a letter from McDonald, who offered to reunite him to his sister for a small sum.

Butler Bates, explained the son, had left behind a large fortune at his death, and the letter was a decoy and another of McDonald's schemes to get Burton West, and put him out of the way, so that the plotter could have a chance to figure for the whole Bates property.

When Burton was informed that his sister was really alive and the wife of the not yet dead Fairfax, his delight knew no bounds, and in celebration of their first meeting, he and Fred engaged in a regular old-fashioned bug.

In fact, explanations in general, ensued, which took up so much time that the night was passing rapidly.

As it approached midnight, Johnny Smile asked.

"Boss, what yer goin' ter do 'bout that graveyard racket? Hain't goin' ter let them fellers scoop in thet deposit, aire ye?"

Deadwood Dick smiled.

"Well, not if I know myself!" he replied.

"I know a trick worth two of theirs. By collusion with Doctor Disco, and the detectives, I have had the body of Peggy Parkhurst removed from that grave, and interred in another spot. Therefore, if McDonald opens the original grave he will have his trouble for his pains, and you won't be able to find a madder man, in all Dakota."

"Was any money found in, the coffin?" asked Fairfax.

"Yes, and it is all in my possession. As soon as I can get around to it, I will divide it between your wife and Mr. Burton Bates, according to the directions of the will."

"And, you can rest assured of one thing," Burton spoke up, "and that is, that the three of you shall come in for a good reward, for your services!"

Promptly at one o'clock, that night, Duncan McDonald reached the cemetery gate.

It was a beautiful night, and the soaring moon shed a ghostly sort of light on all earthly objects.

With particularly weird effect did it dwell upon the white headstones of the cemetery.

Peggy Parkhurst's new-made grave was at the further side, from the gates and on a direct line with it.

As McDonald entered the cemetery, he did not see any thing of the Detective who did night duty, and concluded that he must have fallen asleep.

If such were the case, it would be a capital opportunity to capture him; so, concluding not to await the arrival of Pillbury, the schemer stole toward the grave, with cat-like silence and caution.

Half-way was he to the grave when he made a discovery. In the path he was following, he found the detective stretched out dead. His forehead had been crushed in by some blunt instrument, and so long had he been dead that his body was growing cold and rigid.

Who had done the deed? Pillbury?

The thought was startling.

"I wonder if the infernal fraud has been playing a game on me?" he gritted. "He may have come here long ahead of me, secured the money, and skipped!"

The thought was maddening, and with a bitter oath, he bounded toward the grave.

He reached it, and saw that it had been partly opened, but not far enough to reach the coffin.

"Ha! curse him! He has been here, but my approach frightened him away. If I find him, I will blow his brains out!"

He drew a revolver, and dodged here and there among the gravestones; but to no avail. He saw no sign of human presence, and in disgust, he retraced his steps.

When he came within view of the grave again, he halted with an exclamation.

What was this he saw? A ghost?

It looked like it! A tall, white-clad figure stood in spectral outline at the edge of the grave.

McDonald was not superstitious.

"That's no ghost!" he muttered. "Oh! no. You can't come none o' yer monkey business on me, my bloomin' Pillbury. I'll wake up your ideas for you, see if I don't!" and taking deliberate aim, he fired direct at the figure in white.

Following the report of the revolver, there came a piercing yell of pain, and Mr. or Mrs. Ghost, whichever it was, tumbled back, prone upon the ground.

McDonald rushed forward, only to find that he was mistaken. The pretended ghost was Pillbury, and Pillbury was dead.

Searching his body, however, the murderer failed to find money; therefore he concluded that Pillbury had not dug down to the coffin, up to the time he had scented approach.

Seizing a shovel which lay near by, the hardy villain commenced the excavation where it had been left off, and in a short time he had the coffin box bared.

To pry the lid off was but the matter of a moment; then the coffin itself was dragged into the light—too easily dragged indeed, for it seemed very much as if nothing was within it. And prying up the top swinging lid he saw that the body was gone—the coffin empty.

For several minutes McDonald glared into the receptacle, venting his baffled rage in expletives; then slunk from the cemetery (as Deadwood Dick had prophesied) probably the maddest man in all Dakota.

CHAPTER XVI. CONCLUSION.

THE night of the proposed marriage of Duncan McDonald and Fanny Fairfax arrived, and found Fanny apparently ready for the ceremony.

To make the triumph of McDonald's defeat more complete, she had arrayed herself in a grand bridal costume loaned her by Mrs. La Force, and the roses having in a measure returned to her cheeks, she looked inexpressibly pretty and charming.

In the front parlor of the La Force dwelling she awaited the coming of McDonald.

In a back parlor, which communicated with the front, by folding doors, waited several other persons.

Promptly at eight o'clock the door-bell rung, and McDonald was ushered into Fanny's presence.

He looked hardly like a bridegroom.

He was muffled up in a great overcoat, and wore spurred top-boots, as if he were about to take a horseback journey.

His face, too, was clean-shaven and pale, and instead of his usual genteel derby hat, he now wore a felt, slouch, hard-weather hat.

"Why, Mr. McDonald!" cried Fanny. "Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me!"

"But why this change?"

"It matters not. I have come to say good-by!"

"Good-by?"

"Yes."

"But, how is that?"

"Well, circumstances have arisen that will render it impossible for me to marry you."

"Indeed? Pray explain!"

"Well, the long and short of the matter is, I am guilty of a murder, and shall have to flee for my life!"

"Oh! that is too bad!"

"Bah! no it isn't. All I wanted you for was for your money. As I can't get that, I don't want you. Bah! curse all women. Get out of my way. I'm going!"

He wheeled toward the door only to find himself covered by a half-score of cocked revolvers.

Arrayed in line before him were the Three, Mr. and Mrs. La Force, Burton Bates and Fred Fairfax, while in addition Sheriff Shields and several deputies were on hand.

McDonald's face grew deathly white when he saw the two men whom he supposed he had murdered—Fairfax and Lenton!

"Duncan McDonald!" cried Deadwood Dick, in a stern, impressive tone, "you have reached the end of your rope. I have a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Lucius Pillbury, and the evidence against you is sufficient to hang you. If not, there are two other charges of attempted murder, and other crimes too numerous to mention. Throw up your hands!"

The villain obeyed; but not of his own free will. The excitement brought on a sudden faintness, then a rush of blood to the heart, and, uttering a terrible shriek, he fell to the floor in a fit.

He never came out of it, and after a half-hour of awful suffering, he expired.

And thus he evaded the gallows.

Of course Fred and his wife were reunited as were brother and sister, and a happy reunion it was.

From Deadwood Dick, Fanny and Burton received their fortunes, and after well rewarding Dick, they set out for the East.

The insurance "racket" was of course proven to be a fraud, and the policy was canceled at Frank's own request.

The Three remained in Bismarck long enough to break up the gang of whom Wah Lee was ringleader; then Old Avalanche and Johnny started on a new quest, while Dick headed for Oregon, for what purpose we shall see.

THE END.

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